KNIGHT ORC



I Loosed Orc

II A Kind of Magic

III Hordes of the Mountain King

NOVELLA & PLAYGUIDE

ENGLISH VERSION

KNIGHT ORC

By Level 9 Computing

Loading Instructions and Gameplay Guide

Introduction

In a hole in a mound there lived an orc. Not a clear, dry sandy hole with only spiders to catch and eat, nor yet a comfortable hobbit-hole. It was an orc-hole, and that means a dirty, clammy, wet hole filled with bits of worms and a putrid smell.

It had a perfectly round garbage heap, blocking the doorway, with a slimy yellow blob in the exact middle for spitting practice. The doorway opened onto a sewer-shaped hall - a deeply unpleasant tunnel filled with smoke, with secret panels, and floors snared and pitted, provided with treacherous chairs and lots and lots of booby traps - the orc was fond of visitors.

But what is an orc? Orcs are not seen much nowadays, since they are shy of human beings. They are a pungent people, little bigger than overweight elves, with the charisma of blow flies and the appetite of gannets. Orcs have little or no magic, except a rudimentary skill with knives and strangling cords and, in short, they are evil little pits.

This orc was unusually ugly, even for an orc. His name was Gringleguts.

Grindleguts had lived in the neighbourhood of The Mountain for about a year and most people considered him two steps lower than a tapeworm, not only because of the smell and the plague, but because he kept eating their household pets.

Knight Orc follows on from the events described in "The Sign of The Orc". Grindleguts has been volunteered as their champion by the other orcs, while in a drunken stupor, and tied to a horse so that he won't escape, or fall off, before the joust. Your first task, as the orc in question, is to live long enough to escape over the viaduct to Orc Mountain.

Good luck, Grindleguts. You're going to need it...!

Loading Instructions

Cassette users: To remove a cassette from the box, firmly press the top of the cassette label inwards, and the cassette will pop out.

Remember to always have a blank cassette or a formatted disc at hand to save your game position on. See section 6 of **Game Instructions** for more information about saving and restoring your game position.

Each version of Knight Orc has a Menu program, which will instruct you in the further loading of the game (if necessary). Simply refer to the table below, and select the appropriate loading instructions:

MACHINE	DISC	CASSETTE TAPE
Amiga	Insert game disc at the Workbench prompt	
Amstrad CPC 464/664/6128	**RUN "MENU"**	Disc users type **|TAPE** To load game type **RUN" "**
Amstrad PCW	Load CP/M and type **MENU**	
Apple II/IIe/IIc/IIGS	Insert disc in drive and turn computer on	
Atari ST	Insert disc in drive and turn computer on	
Atari 130XE/800XL*	Insert disc. Hold OPTION while turning computer on	Hold START & OPTION while turning computer on. Start tape and press RETURN
Commodore 64	**LOAD "MENU",8,1**	Press SHIFT and RUN/STOP and start tape
IBM PC and compatibles	Load MS-DOS and type **MENU**	
Macintosh/Macintosh Plus	Double-click the Menu icon	
MSX 64k		**RUN "CAS:"**
Spectrum 48k		**LOAD" "** and start tape
Spectrum 128/Plus2/Plus3	Enter BASIC and type **LOAD "MENU"**	Switch computer on, and press ENTER

* 8-bit Atari users should turn off the machine and remove all cartridges before loading.

Loading Advice

If you're having any problems loading Knight Orc into your computer, then try the following...

Cassette

1. Try the other side of the cassette.
2. Load another game from cassette that you know works correctly, to check that everything is connected correctly.
3. Vary the volume and tone settings on the recorder if you are able to.
4. Clean and demagnetise the recorder (following the maker's instructions).
5. Try another cassette recorder if possible.

Disc

1. Try again from the very beginning. Remove all discs and turn the computer off completely and back on again.
2. Is the disc the right way up ? (This applies especially to Amstrads).
3. Load another game from disc to check that everything is connected correctly.
4. Have you added any non-standard or peculiar hardware to the computer?
5. Clean the drive (following the manufacturer's instructions).

Guarantee (What to do if the program doesn't work!)

If you have no success in getting the program to run correctly, return it to Rainbird (or Firebird in the United States) **without our packaging**, and we'll replace it (if you're returning a disc, make sure it's safely packed!). Please include a short letter telling us exactly what the problem is, and what equipment your computer system comprises of.

Software Returns Department
Rainbird Software
74 New Oxford Street
LONDON
WC1A 1PS

Firebird Licencees Inc.
P.O. Box 49
Ramsey
New Jersey
07446

Game Instructions - Commands

Knight Orc understands a wide range of commands in plain English, from simple one or two word instructions up to complex multiple sentences. This chapter is split into sections describing ways in which to communicate with the program.

1. Movement

To move around The Land, use the following commands:

Word	Abbrv.	Word	Abbrv.
NORTH	N	NORTHEAST	NE
EAST	E	NORTHWEST	NW
SOUTH	S	SOUTHEAST	SE
WEST	W	SOUTHWEST	SW
UP	U	DOWN	D
INSIDE	IN	OUTSIDE	OUT
CLIMB	-	JUMP	-
CROSS	-		

These commands take you to an adjacent location. Use the EXITS command if you want to know which directions are allowed (when EXITS lead in "all directions", this means the eight main compass directions: N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W and NW).

To save time, and so you don't need to draw a map, Knight Orc provides the commands below:

FOLLOW <person> (e.g. FOLLOW INNKEEPER). Try to stay close to someone, moving when they do. Other people can be ordered to follow you as well, see section iii. However, they can sometimes get left a little way behind, because even the most loyal follower will not obey you 100% of the time. Either wait for them, or command them to move to the destination with you following them.

GO TO <place> (e.g. GO TO CASTLE or GO TO WELL). The program works out the sequence of short moves needed to reach your destination (e.g. OUT, NE, N, NE, IN) and carries them out.

RUN TO <place> (e.g. RUN TO INN). This is like GO TO, but does not print the descriptions of the places you run through.

FIND <object> (e.g. FIND GOAT). Again, this works like GO TO and takes you to the place where the object is. Note that you can FIND just about anything, including people, moving objects and things inside containers.

Of course, there is not much that the program can do if you try to FIND something that does not currently exist. Or if the way to your destination is blocked (for example, there is a Thorn Hedge around the tower). In such cases, the program does the best it can.

2. Actions

The majority of commands that you will use are actions, such as opening doors, stealing treasure and hitting dumb animals. Here are some examples:

Command	**Comment**
GET THE KNIFE	Take a stabbing weapon for later use
EXAMINE KNIFE	Stare closely at a tin-plated object
TIE THE CORD TO THE ROPE	Fasten one thing to another
PUT MOUSE IN THE SACK	Best place for it, if you ask me
EAT THE RAT PIE	Delicious
REMOVE THE TETHER	Untie something or take it from a container
PUT KEY UNDER THE MAT	I bet you've always wanted to do this
WEAR THE HELMET	Avoid headaches later on
OPEN THE CHEST	There may be treasure inside it
KICK THE FROG	It's smaller than you

To save typing, commands can refer to more than one object, e.g:

EXAMINE THE HORSE, KNIGHT AND LANCE
TAKE THE CLOAK AND THE KNIFE

Knight Orc understands the following collective nouns:

ALL, EVERYTHING, EVERYBODY, TREASURE, WEAPONS and CLOTHES

Thus, you can enter things like:

GIVE THE TREASURE TO THE INNKEEPER
TAKE ALL THE CLOTHES
EXAMINE EVERYBODY

Exceptions are also understood, for example:

TAKE EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE MAT
DROP ALL THE TREASURE BUT THE GOLD BRICK AND THE GOLD FISH

And you can refer to the last mentioned thing as HIM, HER or IT, e.g:

TAKE THE AXE
EXAMINE IT
THROW IT AT THE GREEN KNIGHT
STEAL THE COIN AND PUT IT IN THE BUCKET

You can type several commands on one line, using punctuation or AND to separate them if you like, though this is not usually needed, e.g:

N NE NE CROSS (Though RUN TO PLACE is better)
OPEN DOOR. GO IN AND TAKE EVERYTHING

Using the full range of command features allows you to enter near-English sentences of considerable complexity. More important, it means the game is more likely to understand what you mean.

3. Talking to Other Characters

Orcs are not known for their small-talk and much prefer action to words, especially when that action is mindless, violent and aimed at someone smaller than them. So conversation is limited in this game.

People can be asked about things, and a few of them may even answer you. One in particular is a mine of information. For example:

HERMIT, TELL ME ABOUT THE KNIFE
TROLL, TELL ME ABOUT THE RING

People can be commanded to do the same sort of thing that you can do yourself, using the full range of commands. Denzyl is the only person who will obey without being recruited and I leave it to you to work out how to make other people and creatures follow your commands. Remember that you can't finish the game without help. Example commands are:

DENZYL, FOLLOW ME

DENZYL, FIND THE WELL, TAKE EVERYTHING, FIND ME, GIVE EVERYTHING TO ME

DRAGON, FLY SOUTH AND KILL GROK. THEN FOLLOW ME

In some other adventure games, when you give someone a command, they go off and do whatever it was while you have to stand there and wait. Knight Orc is somewhat more realistic.

If you tell Denzyl, "DENZYL, GET THE FISH, FIND ME AND GIVE THE FISH TO ME", he will head off to find it - moving roughly once for every move you make. Then you can get on with solving other puzzles, doing whatever you like, while Denzyl carries out his task. Eventually he will wander back and hand over the fish.

By the end of the game, you may well have acquired a lot of followers, and they can all be give orders to carry out at the same time. For example, if you want a simultaneous attack on the vampire, you might enter commands as follows:

TROLL, WAIT 2, IN, KILL VAMPIRE
MOUSE, WAIT 1, IN, KILL VAMPIRE
IN, KILL VAMPIRE

Needless to say, a lot of puzzles in the later stages of Knight Orc require co-operation between creatures.

4. High Level Commands

Knight Orc provides a number of powerful multi-stage commands, where you enter a single command such as "RUN TO THE TOWER" and the program carries it out in stages. (The idea is that it is easier to enter one command that a lot of little ones.) Most of these have already been described above, and the full list is:

FOLLOW <creature>	Try to stay with someone. STOP FOLLOWING later.
GO TO <place>	Go to the place (the program works out the route).
RUN TO <place>	As "GO TO", without printing location descriptions.
FIND <object>	GO TO where an object is.
KILL <creature>	Hit and/or pursue creature in a fight-to-the-death.
WAIT FOR <creature>	Wait until the creature arrives.
WAIT FOR <number>	Wait for the specified number of 'turns'.
WAIT UNTIL <time>	(Use the TIME command to learn the current time).

If something unforseen happens, these commands can be paused by pressing SPACE. The program will ask if you want to continue: Press Y or N for yes or no.

5. Magic

Magic works in the Knight Orc world and there are twenty-one spells to learn. You'll be able to learn them in later stages of the game and will have to know every spell in order to finish.

To learn spell, you just need to see or hear its name. To use it, once learnt, enter CAST <spellname>, or CAST <spellname> AT <target>. E.g:

CAST GLOW
CAST FIREBALL AT DRAGON
CAST LOCATE AT RING

The functions of the spells are fairly obvious from their names and the rest is up to you!

6. Special Commands

Knight Orc provides a number of general purpose commands:

INVENTORY	(INV) What are you carrying? (Try EXAMINE ME, too.)
SCORE	How badly are you doing?
AGAIN	(A) Repeat the last command
HELP	This sometimes gives you a clue.
QUIT	Stop the game.
BRIEF	Don't report unnecessary text, e.g: exits and shouting.
VERBOSE	Report text in full.

Several commands are provided to control the adventure system, rather than to make progress in solving the game, and these are described below.

Please note that some of these facilities marked with an asterisk are not provided on some smaller computers and that the best way to find if a command is present in the version of Knight Orc for your micro, is to try it.

*	WORDS	Turn off the pictures.
*	PICTURES	Turn them back on again.
*	OOPS	Restore the position as it was before you last moved. OOPS (or UNDO) is a very useful comand and, on larger machines, it can be used several times in succession to step backwards through the game.
	SAVE	Stores the game position on cassette or disc. Insert a formatted disc, or start a blank cassette before using this command. (Commodore 64 users may specify whether to save to cassette or disc by adding **,1** to the filename for tape, or **,8** for disc). When the SAVE has finished, stop the tape, or replace the Knight Orc game disc in the drive, as appropriate.
	RESTORE	Loads a previously SAVEd position from cassette or disc. Enter RESTORE and then answer YES as confirmation. To restore from tape, rewind the cassette on which the position was SAVEd and start it on PLAY (if the cassette doesn't move, press ENTER or RETURN). To restore from disc, put the disc on which the position was saved in the drive, before using RESTORE. If you are asked for a filename or equivalent, enter whatever you called the position when it was SAVEd. When the RESTORE has finished, stop the tape, or replace the Knight Orc disc in the drive, as appropriate.
*	RAM SAVE	Saves the game position in memory. This is quicker than saving on tape or disc, but the data is not as permanent and will be lost if the computer is turned off or reset.
*	RAM RESTORE	Loads a previously RAM SAVEd position.

Note: OOPS, SAVE, RESTORE, RAM SAVE and RAM RESTORE can also be entered in response to a YES/NO question. For example, if you have just been killed in the game and the program is asking if you want to play again, you can use one of them to return to a previous position instead.

Picture Moving

On computers such as the Amiga, Macintosh, and Atari ST, the mouse can be used to move the picture up and down - allowing you to choose how much text is visible below it. Disc versions on some other computers, e.g the Commodore 64, control this feature by means of the up and down cursor (arrow) keys.

Command Editor

Some of the machines with larger memories provide a command line editor which keeps a copy of your previous commands and lets you edit and re-enter them. The command editor is controlled by the cursor keys, delete and backspace, and works in insert mode. Press cursor-up to display your previous commands: the other details are best learnt by trying it.

Game Details

Knight Orc is a single game, with three sections, and you must start with part one, **Loosed Orc**, and solve this before proceeding. The computer will display instructions on how to do this, when the time comes.

Parts two and three, **A Kind of Magic** and **Hordes of the Mountain King**, are linked together, and you can move freely from one to the other.

Scoring

Loosed Orc
The idea is to learn the adventure system and tie ropes together to make a single rope, long enough to use in crossing the chasm. You score points according to its size.

A Kind of Magic and **Hordes of the Mountain King**
Learn magic, recruit followers and escape. You score points for each spell learnt, each follower recruited (providing they have powers which complement, rather than duplicate your own), plus bonuses for solving the final stage of the game.

Hints

When adventurers recognise an orc, they attack.

You are not likely to win many fair fights. Why not run away, or distract your opponent, or cheat in some other way.

You can't take it with you (usually), so it's better to be poor than dead.

Are you really stuck? Take a hint from us...

Blocked by the thorn hedge? Infuriated by the Hermit? Can't recruit the helpers you KNOW are needed to complete this game? Don't despair! Although Rainbird brings you the most fiendishly devised adventures, we've got a heart (who writes this stuff?), so if you are really stuck trying to solve a seemingly unsolvable problem, fill in the Hint Request Form provided with this package.

Credits

Idea, design and text	Pete Austin
Game programming	Mike Austin
Adventure System	Mike and Nick Austin and John Jones Steele
Map and Testing	Andrew Deeley
Testing	Paul Coppins
Original Paintings	Godfrey Dowson
Additional artwork	Neil Strudwick and Stuart Lee
Poster	Paul Human

With thanks to all at Rainbird (and the Dragon, Mouse and Troll) without whom this game could not have been completed.

THE SIGN OF THE ORC

A short story

by

PETER McBRIDE

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1

Grok leant against the cobwebbed window frame and stared out over the open plain. The grasslands were sprinkled with the pink and yellow of spring flowers; the scattered trees sparkled with the first unfurling leaves; the air trilled to the sound of larks and linnets; and the sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky dappled with pretty little fuffy white clouds. A perfect Spring day! So different from the year before, and the thirty years before that, when the plains had been bare and silent and shrouded in a smog so thick that day and night were as one; when all that was bright and good had been swept away by the forces of dark.

"Cor, what a waste of thirty years!" Grok grumbled. "Must get the lads busy again, and get out there and devastate it."

Not that there were that many of them to do much devastating. Only a tattered remnant had managed to stagger back to the Orc's Head Tower after that last battle. Home! - the Orc's Head Tower of Mount Olympus. The guardtower, carved out of the solid rock in the shape of a giant Orc's head, its fang-rimmed mouth the entrance, its empty eye sockets the watchwindows; this was their home. Here they had lived as soldiers of the Dark Lord, guarding the passages and chambers of 'Is mountain highness and to here they had returned after 'Is defeat. Here they could find peace and quiet in which to lick their wounds - and other revolting things - and to recover from the terrible ordeal of months of fresh air and sunlight.

They had really taken a beating that last time! That great army of Orcs with warg cavalry at the front, Wild Men of the East on the West side (There's a story there as well, they made such a song and dance about everything); Wild Women of the West to the East; ogres, warlocks, witches and trolls in the middle and 'Imself at the head, surrounded by 'Is own demonic creations. They should have been able to smash anyone. And what had happened? Just when they needed 'Im, 'Imself had disappeared in a puff of smoke without so much as a by your leave, and left them stranded. The trolls had turned to stone; the wargs had turned on their riders and eaten them; 'Is demonic creations had turned nasty and eaten the ogres, warlocks, etc; and the Wild Men of the East and the Wild Women of the West had turned to other things apart from fighting and headed North to have a Wild Persons party. The Orcs - more fools them - hadn't turned at all, and had suffered the consequences.

"Oh, well," thought Grok, "at least I made it back home, and every day brings in a few more of us. One of these days we'll be ready to have another go - but no more meddling with magicians. They were a pain in the neck."

Thinking of necks, Grok realised something was crawling across his. He reached back, caught a spider and scrunched on it thoughtfully. As he chewed, he listened to a distant sparrow and remembered the times when he had been an orckid out on plains duty, killing everything that moved - well, everything except other orckids that is - well, hardly ever killing other orckids, only when they got in his way, or argued, or trod on his sandwiches, or sat were he wanted to, or. . Yes, well - killing everything that moved. He used to go on patrol by himself after a while.

He remembered other times when he would go on long foraging expeditions, right out to where the men lived. Sometimes he'd bring back a barrel of apple brandy, or a whole side of well-hung bacon, or even a nice juicy child. But he never forgot the milk. Milk for his mother, so that she could make

blue cheese, rancid butter and sour cream. They were good! Didn't get them nowadays. What had happened to his mum? Oh, yes, he recalled at last, he'd eaten her. Well, there wasn't been food to be had that winter, and soldiers had to be fed, and his mum was quite fat - and tasty too.

Why did he keep thinking about food? Grok puzzled for a while, then a rolling rumble mumble from inside his jerkin reminded him. He hadn't had supper! Where was that lazy Oink?

"Oink!!!" he bellowed through the open door. "Where's my grub, you bone-idle good-for-nothing?"

No reply. He shouted again, loud enough to set the passages ringing. Still no reply. Grok grumbled and went out into the dimly lit corridor.

"Oink! Oink!" he shouted, as he stomped towards the kitchens. "Oink! Oink!" As he was passing the guard-room, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, and then he saw stars as something smashed down onto his head.

"Er. . . sorry, Chief. ." Brainz put down his club and helped Grok to his feet. "I thought you was a pig. Good job you had your helmet on! Ha, Ha!" He spoke hoarsely, but laughed sheepishly. Then, cowed by Grok's stare, he ducked back into the guard-room.

Grok glared after him, but, driven by the rumblings in his stomach, he continued in his search for Oink and his supper.

Oink was slumped at the bottom of the stairway that led from the kitchen. An empty tray and iron-studded wooden club lay on the ground beside him. Grok hauled him to his feet and slapped him around.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "Where's my grub?"

Oink's eyes rolled around loosely, like two marbles in a gutter. Grok tried again to slap him awake, and when that didn't work, he breathed on him. Oink's eyes snapped into focus.

"What happened?" Grok asked again.

"I don't know, Chief. I think someone must have hit me. ."

Grok had a sudden inspiration. "Have you been going oink?"

"Going what?" asked Oink, then he noticed the empty tray. "Here, they've nicked your supper. There was a bottle of booze and half of a nice big rat pie I'd just made and . . . is that your club, Chief?"

Grok looked at it. "Yeh, it is! What's it doing here? I left it in the room by the Gate."

"Well, I reckon someone must have picked it up, then when they hit me on head with it - me not wearing my helmet and all - it knocked me out, and they nicked your grub. Then they left the club because they couldn't carry that as well." Oink finished with a flourish, proud to have worked it out all by himself.

"Picked it up like this? . . ." asked Grok, hefting the club, ". . .then hit you over the head like this? . . ." he brought it down with a crunch, ". . . you not

wearing your helmet and all - and knocked you out? Then nicked my grub?"

"Yeh. . ." said Oink slowly as he slid down the wall and slumped to the ground.

"Thieving rogues," muttered Grok thoughtfully, as he stepped over Oink and headed up the stairs to the kitchen. "The other half of that rat pie should still be up there. . . And Oink!," he shouted over his shoulder, ". . . make sure you wear your helmet next time you're bringing me my supper."

2

Brandon the dwarf sat cross-legged on the floor of the dragon's treasure chamber with a large gold plate laid across his knees. He buffed it vigorously until it gleamed in the torchlight, and as he polished he sang a song, to the tune of an ancient Ambridge air.

"Golden swords and golden shields,
Golden cups and saucers,
Golden carts with golden wheels,
Golden bits and bobs,
To get lots of lustre
Just muster a duster
And use lots of elbow cream,
Then sit and buff the golden hoard
While I sit and dream."

"Shouldn't that be elbow grease?" asked the dragon, who had been supervising operations.

"Yes," replied Brandon, "but I couldn't find a rhyme." That was not strictly true. The verse had originally used 'elbow grease' and ended 'Until the dragon's decease', but he wasn't going to sing that out loud.

"I say," said the dragon, after a few minutes deep thought, "I've just written a song of my own all about gold. Tell me what you think of my masterpiece. . .

Gold, gold, wonderful gold!
There's nothing like it for warming you up when the weather's cold.
And when you've got a lot of it,
It's handy to have a fellow
Who'll spend lots of time polishing it
To keep it nice and bright and yellow.

. . .How about that, then?"

"Oh, a marvellous triumph of the poet's art, O Brilliant One," exclaimed Brandon with as much enthusiasm as he could manage. Then, as he wasn't very good at lying, he changed the subject quickly. "The orcs are back", he said. "I can smell them."

The dragon sniffed the air doubtfully. "Are you sure? I can't smell anything."

"Well they do say, O Great Fiery Breath, that smoking ruins your sense of smell." Brandon told him.

"Well until someone invents smokeless fuel, I haven't got much choice, have I?" replied the dragon huffily. "And frankly, ducky," it added, "I sometimes think it's a blessing. I mean, when did you last have a bath?" Brandon was going to protest about the lack of a bath, or water to put in it, but the dragon shut him up with a snort of black smoke. The dwarf choked and spluttered.

"I don't know," said the dragon airily. "Talk about me smoking, but you're the one with the cough. Tut, tut. I bet you smoke as well, when I'm not watching. Tut, tut." It grinned at him complacently.

I don't do anything when it's not watching, thought Brandon. Because it's always watching. Because it knows that if it didn't watch me, I'd nick as much of this gold (that I spend my days and nights polishing so lovingly) as I could carry, and scarper.

The dwarf stopped coughing and sighed quietly. Patience, he told himself. The time will come. Perhaps he could persuade it to go on an orc-hunt. That would get it out of the way.

"Are you going to do anything about them, Oh Winged Orc-Slayer?" he asked the dragon. "They might be after your gold. . ."

"They're not the only ones, sweety," it replied, giving him the eye. "And besides, I don't like orcs."

"Isn't that a good reason to hunt them?" Brandon was confused.

"No, you fool. I don't like them to eat. That's the only reason I hunt. I'm not a human, you know. I don't do it for fun. . . . Now, if it was humans out there, it would be a different thing altogether. They're tasty!"

Brandon sniffed the air hopefully. "I think I can smell a human." he said brightly.

The dragon guffawed with laughter, enveloping the dwarf with plumes of smoke. "Oooh, you are a one!" It clapped him on the back playfully. Brandon flew across the room and came to rest in the ornamental armour and jewelled weapons of war section. (He had decided, some long time before, that if he couldn't steal the treasure, he might at least catalogue it. He got some sense of ownership that way.)

"On your way back, Brandon," the dragon called to him, "could you go over to the royal toys and games pile and find the pearl-inlaid dominoes. I fancy a game."

Brandon lifted a diamond-studded mace off his chest and struggled upright. The solid gold weapon swung heavily in his hand. One of these days, he thought, I'll have a go at that grinning smoke-box. He shrugged and put the mace neatly back in its place. What good would it do? he told himself. If I got a lucky blow in, I might bruise its shin before it fried - and ate - poor little old me.

He went to get the dominoes. The set was suffering from these games. Whenever the dragon was stumped, it would pick out the pearl inlays to change the value of his dominoes. All the sixes and fives had turned into fours, and the threes had been split between ones and twos.

3

Meanwhile, seven leagues away, Barney Wallop was resting on his scythe in the field behind the Orc's Head Tavern. He mopped the sweat off his brow and frowned at the acre of close cropped grass. There was a rash of molehills across the centre, and he had seen far too many daisies, dandelions and nettles as he had worked his way across. It was going to take years to turn it back into the smooth green sward that his father had tended so lovingly in the days before the orcs had devastated the countryside around the mountain. Still, he thought, as he tied his red-spotted hanky around his red-spotted neck, it was only the third cut of the spring, and there was quite a while yet before the season started. He might have a decent surface by then, with a bit of luck.

He picked up the gleaming, razor-sharp scythe and made to put it over his left shoulder, then thought better of it and transferred it to the other side. He'd already sliced off his right ear by mistake. He didn't want to lose the left one as well.

Time for a pint of good ale, and get ready for the lunchtime rush. If the weather held, he'd have a go at those weeds in the afternoon. He walked carefully around the edge of the field and went into the Tavern.

"Do our lodgers be back, Jack?" he asked as he entered the Tap Room.

"Not yet, Mr. Wallop. They'll be right hungry too. They did forget to take the lunch, what the missis had made for them." Jack, the pot boy, polished another pewter tankard with his long white beard and hung it - the tankard - on the rack with the rest. Their well-buffed sides gleamed and twinkled in a beam of sunlight. And so they should! Young Jack had been polishing them daily for seventy years - with a cloth for the first fifty, and then, when cloth was scarce, with his beard. It gave them a lovely, satiny sheen.

"Nice job, Young Jack!" Barney complimented him as he always did. "Nearly done?"

"Last one coming up, Mr. Wallop." Jack buffed the tankard vigorously, hung it on the rack, then tied a knot in his beard to keep it out of the way for the rest of the day.

Barney drew himself a foaming pint and drank slowly, to check its quality, as he always did, then drew another, as he always did, and drank that too, just in case. "I'm not too sure about this keg," he announced, as he always did. "I think I'd better check it again."

"I shouldn't if I were you," muttered Jack. "The missis do be watching." (As she usually was.)

"Well, I suppose it will be alright," Barney pretended to be unaware of Mrs. Wallop, "though I do like to make sure that my customers get the best."

The lunchtime rush, Old Norman and Geffer Smithies, arrived shortly afterwards. Over their pints, they discussed the important things in life; how the grass was getting on in the field, and what Barney should do about moles and daisies; whether or not the dragon would be visiting the village again, now that the Saturday afternoon tournaments were starting up again. (There had been a bit of trouble at the last tournament, thirty years ago, - before the orcs finally drove the people away. Some young knight, name of

George, hadn't appreciated that the dragon was there by invitation, to roast the ox, and had tried to fight it. The dragon had gone off in a huff, and they had to eat half-raw beef.) Barney was quite hopeful that they would be able to get the Wednesday evening bowls sessions going again. They had brought in a nice bit of trade, before the troubles.

"What are you going to use for bowls?" asked Old Norman.

"I thought we'd do like we always used to." Barney replied. "I mean, we don't call this place the Orc's Head for nothing."

"There be orcs back in the mountain then, be they?"

"So, I hear, Gaffer," Barney replied. "I expect to know for sure soon enough though. Them lodgers of mine have gone over that way this morning. If they doesn't come back, then we'll know the orcs are there."

"To the mountain? By theyselves?" Old Norman was intrigued. "They be right foolhardy young fellers. What they doing there? In fact, if it comes to that, what do they be doing here at all?"

Barney's lodgers had caused quite a stir since their arrival a few days before. Apart from the fact that they came from the Mendips - which being over twenty leagues away made them foreigners - no-one knew anything much about them. They seemed to spend a good deal of time thinking - an unusual pastime in that part of the world, and had been asking a lot of questions about the mountain - though saying little in return.

"I don't know what they be at," Barney replied. "And there ain't be no use asking me why they did head off towards the mountain this morning, 'cos I doesn't know."

"Why did they go, Barney?" asked Gaffer Smithies. . . . . .

4

"Oink!"

It was breakfast time in the Orc's Head Tower. In fact, it was after breakfast time, and still no food on the table. Grok, Brainz, Oleari, Fatty, and the rest of Grok's band sat around the guard-room table looking mean and hungry. Only Flies was chewing. True to his name, he was catching flies and eating them.

"Oink!" Grok bellowed again. "Where's that useless slop hound got to? Brainz, go and find out what's happening in the kitchen." As Brainz left the room, Grok called after him, "Don't forget your helmet!"

For the last few weeks, ever since that time Grok had found Oink at the bottom of the kitchen stairs, there had been some funny goings-on in the mountain. Several of the orcs had disappeared from their posts and turned up later in other parts of the mountain, claiming not to know how they got there. (Grok suspected secret boozing.) Others had been found lying around with splitting headaches, claiming to have been sneaked up on and clubbed. (Grok still suspected secret boozing, but he was going to make sure that they didn't have any excuses. Hence the Helmet Rule.)

"Remember when we was coming back across the mountains, and ran out of food. . .", mused Oleari, speaking to no-one in particular, ". . . and we ate Spuds. . ."

"No, there wasn't no food at all!" interrupted Fatty. "Certainly no spuds. No carrots, neither."

"Spuds was one of us, you great stupid lump." Grok growled at him.

"Anyway, I reckon we should have eaten Oink instead." Oleari went on. "I know Spuds' cooking wasn't as greasy and burnt as Oink's, but at least it used to get to the table."

"Used to climb off again, sometimes, before you could grab hold of it." Grok remembered Spuds cooking too.

"Scuse I, Chief. ." Brainz put his head round the door. ". . . but there don't be no sign of Oink nowhere. No food neither!"

"No food!" exclaimed Grok. "This is serious. Come on, you lazy pack of cellar rats, let's find him."

The orcs scrambled up, grabbed their helmets and ran out into the passage, shouting "Oink! Oink!"

5

Meanwhile, three levels down and a lot deeper into the mountain, Brandon the dwarf had had a spot of luck. A long time before, he had discovered a battered old wooden case in a dusty corner. It was locked, there was no key, so he had ignored it. He knew full well that if there was anything of value inside, the dragon would have smashed it open already.

On this particular day, Brandon had been sorting through the clothes heap. It wasn't a very pleasant job, for these clothes were the dragon's equivalent of empty bags and boxes - they were what the food had been wrapped in. . . But Brandon needed more space to display the collection of jewelled thrones and other furniture, so it had to be done.

As he was sorting, he felt something heavy in a pocket, and found a key. And the key reminded him of the old wooden case, and as he would rather do anything else but sort, he thought he would give it a try. The key fitted and turned, and the lid opened to reveal a Complete Adventurer's Kit.

Compass, measuring tape, paper, pens and ink for making maps; stethoscope for listening at doors; small drill for making spy holes, soft chalk for marking your trail and a hold-all bag - the sort that you could put all kinds of things in and never fill. Brandon's heart started to race. His brain began to whirr. Here was the answer to his prayers!

"Brandon Branniganson! What are you doing skulking over there!" the dragon shouted suspiciously.

"Nothing, nothing, Oh Mighty Emperor of the Mountain!" Brandon shut the box quickly and scurried back to his master. "Merely tidying, Your Royal Beastliness."

"Found something interesting have we?" The dragon fixed an eye on the trembling dwarf. "What was it?"

Brandon fluttered like a moth round a burning torch. He knew he could hide no secrets from the light of that stare. He struggled to resist, but felt his defences crumbling, then suddenly - salvation!

"Oink! Oink!" A distant echo broke the tense silence in the lair. The dragon shut off its truth glare with a rapid blink, snapped its head round and pricked up its ears. "Oink!" That sound again, but this time deeper, and issuing from another passage.

"Pork chops!" said the dragon, smacking its lips. "Haven't had them for years." It waited for another "Oink" to fix the direction, then leapt off its treasure mound and sped out of the chamber.

Brandon let out a long sigh of relief and sank to the ground. He had been sitting there, saying "Phew, that was close!", for several minutes before he suddenly realised that he had got the opportunity of a lifetime. He jumped up and ran to get the Adventurer's Kit.

His cunning dwarvish brain was working properly now. He thrust the compass and marker chalk in his pockets, grabbed the hold-all bag and dumped the rest of the Kit into it, then scampered round the lair throwing in all the choicest pieces - including the entire Individual Gems and Small Objects d'Art collection - then, when the weight of the bag was as much as

he could bear, he headed off out of the chamber in the opposite direction to the dragon.

He paused briefly to take off his boots and tie them round his neck, then ran off silently in stockinged feet.

He travelled fast, but carefully; checking the compass constantly to keep his direction in the twisting tunnels; marking every awkward junction with his chalk in case he had to back track; listening avidly for the sound of orc's or dragon's feet; and sniffing the air as he ran. It was a shame that he could only smell his boots, as otherwise he might have had some warning about the adventurer. As it was, Brandon ran straight into him as he came round a sharpish bend in a passage. He bounced off him and the weight of his hold-all bag tipped him over.

Brandon picked himself up, and was delighted to see it was a man - and a pleasant-looking young fellow - that he had crashed into, not an orc, or worse, the dragon! He reached out a hand in greeting, and started to say a cheery "Hello", but the adventurer gestured briefly and spoke a single word of command before Brandon could finish. There was a flash, and Brandon was enveloped in smoke. As the smoke cleared, he found himself in total blackness.

6

The Great Oink Hunt started as a shambles and deteriorated rapidly. No-one believed Brainz' claim that all the food had disappeared, so they all headed for the kitchen to check. There wasn't really room in there for sixteen of them, and when Fatty discovered a small, green furry loaf, there definitely wasn't room for them to fight about it. That didn't stop them from trying.

Fatty had scarcely finished saying "Look what I've got", before he hadn't got it any more. Skraggit grabbed it and shouted "It's mine!". But by then it wasn't. Fatty swung his club at Spindleshanks, who was then holding the loaf, but he hit Oleari, who had got in the way. Oleari pulled back his arm to smash Fatty, and poked Grindleguts in the eye, so Grindleguts joined in that fight. Meanwhile, another battle was raging on the floor, where Spindleshanks had dropped the loaf after Skraggit had stamped on his foot.

In the end, Grok caught the loaf as it was flung into the air and stuffed it into his mouth before anyone could reach him. With the loaf gone, the fight dwindle to a halt, with a few last blows being flung to settle scores.

"Right, enough messing about!" he ordered, spraying green furry breadcrumbs as he spoke. "There'll be nothing else to eat until we find Oink. So let's get busy."

"And if he hasn't got the food, do we eat him?" asked Oleari hopefully. "We'll see," muttered Grok darkly. With only sixteen orcs in his command he didn't want to see the numbers reduced any further, but Oink was being a nuisance, getting himself robbed and lost and all. "Spread out and find him." Grok tried a grand sweeping gesture to inspire his troops, but in the overcrowded kitchen he finished up with an arm in Oleari's mouth. He only just got it out in time.

The orcs followed Grok down the stairs and out into the passages below. From there, they fanned out in sixteen different ways, and set the ancient stone walls ringing to the cries of "Oink".

Grok had tramped around half the morning, shouting himself hoarse, when he had an inspiration. The Dark Tower! Where 'Imself used to live in days gone by. The Dark Lord had never been one to miss out on life's little luxuries, and Grok decided that a visit to his cellars ought to be worth the effort. Any food that had been left should be well rotted by now, and 'Is fancy wines ought to have gone at least a bit vinegary. The more he thought about it, the better he liked the idea. Grok turned for the Tower and hurried off.

The Tower had changed since Grok's last visit. Then it had been clean and warm and dry - on account of 'Is Eternal Fire that blazed away all the time. It was much nicer now, cold and damp and thick with spider webs and rat droppings. Grok made a note to send Oink here - once they'd found him - to get some more rats for pie-making.

Grok smashed the lock on the cellar door with his club, then dropped the club to get a good two-handed grip on the heavy door. He heaved it open slowly, then growled with pleasure. What a sight met his eyes, and what a stench assaulted his nostrils! Big hams and joints of venison shimmered blue-green in the torchlight; fermenting cakes fizzed and popped soggily; mice scampered in and out of huge round cheeses; and in the middle of the floor stood three wooden casks, their lids rising and falling gently as bubbles of gas escaped.

The orc went straight to the nearest cask, took off his helmet and filled it with dark, sour wine. He drank deeply.

"Aaah!" he sighed with satisfaction, then "Uuuh!" he sighed as he slumped to the floor. He had been hit on the head with his own club and - him not wearing his helmet and all - been knocked out. The roving adventurer who had just bopped him, examined the cellar carefully, making a note of anything that might prove useful, then strode off with Grok's club tucked into his belt.

There were other adventurers at large in the mountain that day, as Fatty, Oleari, Spindleshanks, Skraggit, Fenay and Samantha (his father had a wicked sense of humour and couldn't stand orckids) discovered to their cost. One by one, their searches came to sudden, violent ends.

7

Elsewhere, Brainz and Grindleguts had got their own kind of trouble. They had met up on the second level below the guard-room, and decided to join forces. They had both noticed that the tunnels were no longer ringing with cries of "Oink!" in the same way that they had been at the start of the hunt. In fact, apart from another voice somewhere on the next level down, they couldn't hear anybody else at all.

"Do you think they've all given up, Brainz?" asked Grindleguts.

"I hope that's what it is," he replied. Brainz hadn't said anything about it to anybody else, but he had had rather a nasty experience only a couple of days previously. He'd been walking along, minding his own business. (Well, more or less. Actually, he'd just been into Grok's room and picked his pockets while he was asleep.) Anyway, so there he was, wandering down an empty passage, sorting through the booty that he was carrying in his helmet when, suddenly, this human appeared from nowhere and - bonk! - that was the last he knew about it. He hadn't said anything, partly because no orc ever likes to admit to being beaten, but mainly because Grok would ask why he wasn't wearing his helmet. Grindleguts had also had a similar experience, which he hadn't said anything about either, on account of the fact that he was raiding the kitchen at the time. So when Brainz suggested that they joined forces, he was very happy to agree. They decided to go in search of the orc they could hear down below, but to keep on shouting for Oink in case they met Grok.

They didn't meet Grok. They met the dragon. It was lying in wait inside one of the great halls that were carved out of the lower levels of the mountain. As they entered, it pounced with a cry of "Roast Pork and Crackling!" and landed flat on the pair of them. It lay on top for a moment, chuckling greedily, until it realized that its prey didn't quite smell right, and felt rather too lumpy.

It eased itself upright, with a claw clamped heavily over each of them, and examined its catch. "Orcs!" it said with disgust. "Yuck!" Then it picked up Grindleguts and asked him where the pigs had got to, but the orc was too flattened to speak. "Pah!" it snorted, tossing Grindleguts over its shoulder. It walked off, over Brainz, and continued its hunt outside.

Brainz and Grindleguts had just about managed to stagger upright when the dragon came back. It picked one up in each claw and sat back on its haunches.

"Right, you two nasty, smelly little things! Where are those pigs?" It demanded, shaking them around a bit to show it meant business.

"W-W-W-W-h-h-h-a-a-t-t-t p-p-p-i-i-i-g-g-s-s-s?. . ." asked Brainz.

The dragon stopped shaking him as it couldn't tell if he was lying with his head wobbling so much. "Those pigs out there. Didn't you hear them going Oink?"

"That was us." Brainz told him.

"Nonsense. Orcs don't go 'Oink', they go 'Kill! Eat! Smash! Ravage!'." The dragon was not convinced.

"They do when they're looking for him." said Brainz timidly.

"Looking for who?" It was getting confused by this conversation.

"Oink" replied Grindleguts.

"Ah-Ha!" snapped the dragon, "So you're the one who thinks he's a pig. Well perhaps I'll see if you taste like one." It brought the struggling orc closer to its great jaws with its massive, smoke-blackened teeth.

"No! No!" cried Grindleguts. "Oink is the name of the orc we're looking for!" he gabbled.

The dragons great flared nostrils twitched as they filled with the smell of the orc, and it decided against eating him. But it was still determined to get to the bottom of this pig business.

"Does this Oink-orc think he's a pig, then?" It asked, but before either could answer, another cry of "Oink!" echoed into the chamber.

"That is definitely a pig!" The dragon dumped them on the ground, with strict instructions to keep quiet and not frighten it off, then it sneaked away on tiptoes.

The orcs listened carefully. The next "Oink!" was cut off in mid-Oink, but they could still hear the dragon's claw clattering quietly along. Something else had got to their fellow orc first. Shortly afterwards there was the noise of a scuffle, then a triumphant "Ah-Ha!", followed by the sound of the dragon marching off dragging something behind it.

Grindleguts and Brainz waited until it was quiet, then crept cautiously out to see what had happened. They found Flies slumped in a doorway, his helmet rolling slowly around beside him.

"I only took it off for a minute to scratch my head," he moaned.

8

Brandon stood in total darkness and tried to work out what had happened. Had that adventure-magician made him blind? Cast him into some limbo at the edge of the AfterLife? Or was there some less drastic explanation? Perhaps he was in a bag. The dwarf waved his arms about. No, he wasn't in a bag, and now that the smoke was clearing from his nose, he noticed a foul, but comfortingly familiar, smell about the place. He was still in the mountain. It positively reeked of mould, damp, dirt and orcs - mouldy, damp, dirty orcs. And his acute hearing told him that he wasn't alone. . . . .

"Who's there?" he asked cautiously.

"Oink"

"Oh. A pig. Hello, little pig. I hope the dragon doesn't find you."

"No, that's my name!" said Oink crossly.

"Coo! A talking pig with a funny name! Hello, Nothats. You are a nice little pig, aren't you? Not a nasty big boar?" Brandon asked hopefully.

"I am not a nice, flaming little pig. . ."

"Oh!", cried Brandon, sounding worried.

". . . And I'm getting fed up with cracks about my name. So any more stupid remarks from you, and I shan't just get fed up - I shall get fed! Know what I mean?" Oink growled menancingly and ground his teeth together.

Brandon knew exactly what he meant and edged away from the voice. After that, neither of them spoke for some time, Brandon wondering what to do, and Oink not much caring. The orc had had more than his fair share of trouble with adventurers in the recent past - this was not his first experience of being teleported, and he had lost count of the number of times he had been bashed over the head. So he had decided to stay where he was for the time being. It was nice and dark and damp and quiet and that there were no adventurers around, and that was enough for him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Oink. . ." Brandon began politely, breaking the long silence, "but do you know where we are?"

"Wherever those blasted humans have sent us. Pah! Teleporting they calls it; flaming nuisance I calls it!" Oink spat.

Brandon could hear the orc's angry silence, and waited for him to simmer down before speaking again. "Er, . . . excuse me, Mr. Oink, Sir, but do you think we should try to find a way out of here?"

"No."

So that was the end of that conversation. After a while, Brandon decided that he was going to get out - with or without the orc's help. He started to fumble his way round the pitch black room. It was not particularly big, but it did have a lot of arches and alcoves, and the floor was not very even.

After a while, Oink, who could see quite well in the dark, got tired of watching the dwarf stumbling and bumbling around. It was difficult to sulk

in that atmosphere. "It's over there." he told the dwarf.

"What is?" asked Brandon, "and where is it?"

"The door. That's what you want isn't it? It's in front of you and left a bit." The orc watched as Brandon tried to work out which was his left hand. "You better mind that hole in the floor" he added.

"What hole?" asked Brandon. But he soon found out.

The hole was at the top of a smooth, round shaft. It dropped more or less straight down for twenty or thirty feet, then angled off first right, then left, then right again, bouncing Brandon around so that he finished up head downwards, before settling into a steady helter-skelter spiral - the sort where you can really build up speed. And Brandon built up speed. He must have been travelling at over forty leagues an hour when he reached the bottom of the spiral. There the shaft straightened out, and flattened out, and Brandon lost speed steadily - if painfully - as he bumped along the uneven bottom, before flying out into open space and falling heavily face-downwards onto a mound of gold coins.

"Ooh! Hello, Brandon love. I thought I'd lost you!" The dragon was pleased to see his little friend return. "Where've you been? I was getting quite worried about you!"

The dwarf rolled over slowly and looked around. How was it, he wondered, that when you want to get to a dragon's treasure chamber, it is impossible to find, but that when you want to avoid it, it is impossible to miss. And Brandon did want to avoid it. He had not forgotten that he had stolen a sizeable chunk of the treasure, and that the dragon was liable to get into the most dreadful rages if it misplaced so much as a single coin.

He studied the dragon warily, trying to work out what line he should take. Should he confess all and thrown himself at the dragon's mercy? No, the dragon didn't have any for him to throw himself at. Should he deny everything, or try and blame the theft on an adventurer? Perhaps, but lies would only work as long as the dragon didn't give him The Eye. It seemed to be in a very good mood - that was often a bad sign - but it was picking its teeth with a pearl-handled dagger, so it must have eaten recently - that was a good sign.

"Did you get your pig, then?" he asked, by way of conversation.

"Don't be silly, there weren't any pigs. It was just those stupid, noisy orcs!" the dragon spoke as if it had never thought otherwise. "But I did find a human! Tasty young fellow too. One of those - what do you call 'em - adventurers. Do you know," it added confidentially, leaning over towards Brandon, "the naughty man had been trying to steal some of my treasure. He had this whole bagful. Look!"

The dragon pointed to Brandon's bag that lay on the floor between them.

"I say, that's awful. Gosh, anyone who tried to steal that really deserved what he got!" Brandon tried to put feeling into his voice, but the only thing he really felt was pure relief.

9

Grok struggled to sit upright, then sat with his head cupped in his hands. Strewth! That wine was strong. He'd only had one swig and it had blown the top of his head off! It was almost as if someone had clubbed him.

The orc staggered to his feet, contemplated having a drop more to drink - the hair of the warg that bit him, he thought, might dull the throbbing in his head - but decided against it. For one thing, he couldn't find his helmet to drink out of. (It had dropped into the wine barrel, and by the time he had woken up, it had entirely dissolved.) He looked for his club, but he couldn't find that either, so he took a big, blue-green leg of venison off a hook. It would do as a club if he ran into trouble, and he could eat it if he didn't.

He headed off back up the stairs and out into the main tunnel complex, to see how the Oink Hunt was getting on. He didn't get very far. In the great ante-chamber by the back door to the Dark Tower, he met an adventurer. Grok recognised the club tucked into the man's belt, and realised what had happened in the cellar. He decided to take his revenge on the adventurer. He grinned evilly to himself, this was going to be fun.

The adventurer was a little old man with a long white beard that was tied into a knot. He saw the orc coming across the chamber and reached quickly into the pocket at the front of his apron and took out a note-pad.

"Now where was it?" Young Jack muttered to himself, flicking through the pages as the orc advanced on him, wielding the leg of venison menacingly.

"Ah! Here we are!" He pointed a finger at Grok and uttered a single word of command.

There was a flash and a bang, and Grok turned into a frog.

"Grok?!?!" croaked Grok, meaning 'What happened?', as he crawled out from under the leg of venison.

"Hee, hee, hee!" cackled Young Jack. "That was good! But it wasn't what I wanted. Let's have another go and see if I can get it right." He rummaged through his notepad again, found a later entry and tried to point at Grok as he hopped around.

"Keep still, will you! You silly frog!" he demanded, but he had to wait until Grok settled down for a dip in a small puddle before he could get a fix on him. Young Jack spoke another word of command, and was pleased to find that it was the right one.

There was another flash and a bang and Grok was enveloped in smoke. When the smoke cleared, the puddle was frog-less.

Meanwhile, seven leagues away, Grok had found himself on the edge of a closely cropped meadow.

"Grok?" he croaked. (Translation: "Where am I?")

"Grok, Grok!" (Trans: "Hello handsome!") A large green female frog came hopping out of the hedgerow to join him. "Grok grok gro-ok?" (Trans: "Do you come here often?")

"Grok!" croaked Grok. (Trans: "Help!")

"Grok gro-grok grok-grok?" (Trans: "Fancy a trip down to the pond?") she ogled him with big watery eyes.

She was big one, more than twice his size, with massive meaty thighs, forelegs as thick as carrots and rolls of spare flesh that undulated as she waddled. Under different circumstances, Grok would have fancied her (for lunch) but just then, Grok didn't fancy her for anything.

"Grok!!" croaked Grok, (Untranslatable). He turned and hopped off as fast as he could. The frog wooped a kind of froggy "Tally-ho" and set off in pursuit.

Grok, being smaller and lighter, had the acceleration, but she had the staying power. By the time he was half-way across the field, he was starting to tire, but she was still coming on strongly. Desperation spurred him on, but it was useless. At last, with a merry "Gro-o-ok!" she landed on top of him and pinned him to the ground.

"Gr-rok grok gro-gro-grok!" (Trans: "Oooh that was fun!") she croaked. "Grok-grok-grok." (Trans: "Now give us a kiss.")

Grok crouched transfixed as her head came closer and she gave him a big froggy kiss. He closed his eyes and tried to pretend that it wasn't happening. He had the most peculiar swelling feeling as her lips touched his. When he opened his eyes he discovered that he had returned to his normal self. The female frog looked up in surprise and disappointment. "Perhaps I do fancy you after all" said Grok. He reached down, picked her up carefully and slipped her in his pocket. She would do for supper if he didn't find anything else.

Now, where was he? Grok looked around. There was a tavern over on the other side of the field - and an orcish one! At least, Grok assumed that the picture of the orc on the inn-sign meant that.

He tramped across the grass, kicking at the daisies and sending clods of turf flying through the air. He hated flowers, and he hated well-groomed grass.

Barney Wallop caught sight of him through the back window of the Orc's Head Tavern. He grabbed his scythe and started for the door. "You may be kicking at my meadow now, Mr. Orc," he muttered darkly, "but you'll be rolling on it next Wednesday!"

"Edna!" he shouted to his wife, "I'll be back in a minute. There's an orc out on the green. I could use him."

"Hey! So could I!" Mrs. Wallop called quickly. "With Young Jack away, we could do with an extra pair of hands. You try and get ahead now, and we'll be all behind come Saturday night."

"You're right. He could be handy." Barney was forced to agree. "Well, I suppose I shan't be needing any bowls for nearly a week. Perhaps Young Jack will have got over his foolishness and come back by then." He put down the scythe and took up his pacifier - one of Mrs. Wallop's stockings half-filled with sand. He saw that the orc was heading for the tavern door, and lay in wait just behind it.

As Grok walked in, Barney tapped him on the head with his pacifier. It was a

carefully judged bonk, designed to show the orc who was boss, without imparing the roundness of its skull. He caught the orc by a pointy ear as it sagged beneath the blow.

"Right, Mr. Orc. There's plenty more where that one came from if you give me any trouble. Do you understand?" Barney demanded.

Grok didn't understand anything. Things were just happening too fast for him to keep up with himself. In the space of half an hour, he had been clubbed, frogged, teleported, hopped after, unfrogged, lost and pacified. He shook his head dolefully. Barney bopped him again and repeated his question. The message got through that time. Grok nodded.

Barney led him over to behind the bar and showed him the dirty tankards that were piled up beside the sink.

"Now Mr. Orc. You're going to wash that lot - clean! Get them nice and polished - bright! Understand?" He swung Mrs. Wallop's stocking in front of Grok's eyes.

Grok moaned. "Washed! Polished! Cleaned! Bright! Oooooh!" But he nodded and reached for the first tankard. He looked at the hot soapy water in the sink and grimaced with distaste. This was awful! He gritted his teeth and tried to wash a tankard without getting his hands wet. It wasn't possible, and Grok watched with horror as the dirt began to come off his hands. Barney encouraged the orc with his pacifier, until he was satisfied that he was doing a good job, then he got on with his own chores (chiefly beer-tasting) while keeping a watchful eye on his new pot-boy.

That day, Grok learned to wash up, polish (though he had to use a cloth as his wispy, scraggy beard was useless for that job), carry logs and mend the fire, sweep the floor, muck out the stables, chop wood - under the supervision of Mrs. Wallop who was far more terrifying than her husband - make beds, and fetch casks and bottles up from the cellar. He also learnt some other interesting things.

It seemed that the tavern had become a centre for adventurers. Some merchant-magicians, working from one of the back rooms, were selling guide books to the mountain - guide books to HIS mountain! Travellers were coming from far and wide, buying their guide books and heading off across the plain to the Orc's Head Tower. Those that discovered the teleporting secret would pop back for a drink or something to eat every now and then. They would stand around the bar boasting about how many orcs they had bashed or robbed or teleported to who knows where. Grok kept his head down and listened. If they were all telling the truth, there were a lot more orcs scattered about the mountain than he thought. He hoped they were right; as soon as he got back home, he would gather them all together, march back to the Tavern and do for those guide book merchants.

Grok also learned that there was to be some sort of shindig on Saturday, and that the dragon would be coming. He wondered if he could hitch a lift back with it. It certainly might be possible to slip away when the place was busy.

Finally, he learned that there was to be a bowls match on the following Wednesday. For some reason, they all expected him to be playing in it. He did try explaining that he didn't know how to play bowls, but Barney Wallop just laughed (rather unpleasantly, thought Grok) and said "Don't worry about that, Mr. Orc. It's just a matter of using your head."

10

Brandon had been sitting in the corner plucking at the zither for most of the morning. He was trying to remember a song he had learned as a child. At last, he called to the dragon. "I think I've got it now. Would you like to hear it?"

"Is it about gold?" asked the dragon, who liked songs, but most of all loved those that were about gold.

"Actually, no. This one is called The Gay Dragon." Brandon replied.

"Ooh! That sounds fun!" it cried, and stopped polishing its claws so that it could listen properly.

Brandon struck up a chord and began:

"There was a gay dragon
Who lived in a cave.
It was fiercesome and ugly
And not very brave.."

"Just a minute!" the dragon interrupted him. "Are you sure about those last two lines?"

Brandon caught the glimmer in the dragon's eye, and said that perhaps he had got it a bit wrong. So he started again.

"There was a gay dragon
Who lived in a cave
It was ever so handsome
And terribly brave. . ."

The dragon beamed and nodded. Brandon carried on.

"He liked to get up
In the dawn's early light
Though he often slept in
if he'd had a big knight.

In the midst of the day
When the sun shone on high
He liked to tuck in
To a real shepherd's pie.

If it met a fair maiden,
It knew how to treat her.
It would crown her with myrtle,
Then roast her and eat her."

"Personally, I prefer them flavoured with rosemary," commented the dragon, "but otherwise, that was a nice verse. Are there anymore?" Brandon couldn't remember any, but he offered to try to make some up.

"Good idea! I like to hear about gay dragons. But not now, Brandon," it said, stretching and flapping its wings. "Time we were off to the pub."

"To the pub?" this was news to the dwarf.

"Well, it's Saturday isn't it? I always go to the pub on Saturdays in the season - as long as that obnoxious Sir George isn't there! Where do you think I get my best firewater from? It doesn't grow on trees you know! Come on. Climb on my back and I will give you a ride."

"But what about your treasure?" asked Brandon, spotting an opportunity. "Don't you think I ought to stay and guard it? There are thieves about you know."

"Yes, I know, my little dwarvish friend," it said, and gave Brandon a very meaningful look. "Don't worry about my treasure. I've got a spell or two up my sleeve. They don't call me Puff the Magic Dragon for nothing, ducky."

Puff! That was also news to Brandon.

So Brandon the dwarf had his first taste of flying. It was a hair-raising experience for the dragon was rather out of practice, and was starting to get fat on his new diet of adventurers - quite a lot had come too close to its lair in the last few days - but they made it.

The green behind the Orc's Head Tavern was ablaze with colour. Bright striped pavilions dotted the field; knights in shining armour and intricately painted and embroidered surcoats did their limbering-up exercises with much clanking and squeaking of badly-oiled joints; ladies in long flowing robes of red and purple and gold sat sipping infusions of herbs and nibbling delicately on thinly-sliced cucumber sandwiches; liveried servants ran hither and thither for their masters.

The people waved gaily as the dragon glided in over their heads and landed with a long skidding belly-flop.

"Ooh!" it said as they came to a halt in front of Barney Wallop and an ox on a spit. "I do wish you would do something about those molehills! That was quite painful!"

"Sorry Puff, old chap." said Barney cheerfully, "How are you then after all these years? Let's have a look at you. . . . Yes, just as fat and ugly as ever!" He laughed and rubbed the dragon's muzzle playfully.

"Right, then! Down to business, eh?" Let's get this ox going. And none of your nibbling this time! I've got lots of folks to feed today, so I'll need all four of its legs." The landlord waggled a finger at the dragon as he gave it its orders.

Brandon was horrified to hear him talking to the dragon that way. Surely it would frazzle him up for being so familiar? But no! It just snorted with laughter and said "Oh, Mr. Wallop. As if I would!"

The dwarf could only stand and stare at the dragon being put through its paces. It roasted the ox beautifully, showing total control over its fire, so that the meat was crisp and tasty on the outside, but tender and juicy within. The rich smells soon began to waft across the green.

People came and ate and wandered off and came back for more all through the long afternoon and evening. There was much excitement and applause over on the other side of the green, but Brandon didn't see much of it. He

had discovered early on that the big people either trod him underfoot, unseeing, or if they noticed him they would pat him on the head and say "What a nice little chap!" Brandon could not decide which was worse, so he tucked himself out of the way under the dragon's belly. It was warm and cosy there, and occasionally the dragon would use a sharp claw to slice off a piece of ox, and toss the hot juicy meat to the dwarf. At least, well fed and comfortable, he fell fast asleep.

Over in the Orc's Head Tavern, Grok was neither well fed nor comfortable. He was being rushed off his feet fetching and carrying, and all the washing up was making his hands disgustingly soft and clean. Whenever he got the chance, he would slip to the back window to spy out the situation on the tournament field. He had spotted the dragon and was trying to think of some way in which he could sneak out there and clamber on its back without anyone - especially the dragon - noticing, but he wasn't getting far with his plans. Mrs. Wallop never let him out of her sight for more than a few seconds at a time. She kept him on the run, or at the sink, just about all the day. As twilight came, Grok saw the squires starting to pack up the little changing pavilions, and he still hadn't found a way to escape from the tavern. He was getting desperate.

Just then, Barney Wallop poked his head around the tavern door and ordered Grok to run down to the cellar for two casks of best applejack, then bring them out to him. Grok's hopes rose. He got the casks and hurried to find the landlord. His hopes rose even further when he heard that he was to take the casks over to the dragon.

"You clamber up and settle the casks between his shoulder blades, while I go round the front and say goodbye to it," Barney ordered him, "then get back to the missis and finish the washing up."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Wallop." Grok sounded polite and keen. Barney congratulated himself on the success of his pacifier treatment, and wondered vaguely whether or not he ought to buy a set of wooden bowls after all. Young Jack still hadn't come back - except to pop in for a quick pint and disappear in a flash of smoke as soon as Barney had mentioned work.

The landlord started gossiping with Puff about this and that - the dragon was particularly interested in the problem of molehills on the landing strip, and wanted to discuss a range of possible cures - so that by the time they had finished, Barney had completely forgotten about the orc. As for the dragon; when it was time for it to fly off, it felt the weight of Grok on its back, assumed it was Brandon, and went straight home.

11

Grok slipped off the dragon's back as it crash-landed in the mouth of the Orc's Head Tower. He rolled over into the shadows at the side and lay quietly until it had gone off deep into the tunnels. Then - bliss! - he found a really slimy patch of muck and got himself filthy again. Ah, it was good to be home!

But where were the guards? No sign of them! What was going on? "Oi!" he bellowed. "Where are you, you useless lumps of mouldy suet? Who's supposed to be minding the door? Come here this minute!"

The orcs - including those supposed to be on guard duty - were all crammed into the guard-room two floors up. They were trying to decide who should be chief, on account of Grok having disappeared. Brainz thought he should be because he was the cleverest, he said. Samantha said he ought to be because he was the nastiest They all agreed about that. Oink, who had finally stopped sulking and rejoined the others, said he ought to be because he knew where there was a cask of orc-brandy, and he wouldn't tell them if they didn't let him be chief. That was a mistake. They all sat on him, pulled his ears, poked him in various places, and did other unpleasant things until he told them where the cask was. Then they went and got it, and had a booze up. By the time Grok returned, the brandy had run out, and they had got back to arguing about who should be chief. It was between Brainz and Samantha, now that Oink had lost his trump card. The two contenders had tried staring each other out, arm-wrestling and shouting contests - all of which were declared draws by the other orcs. They were now shaping up for a club fight, but couldn't agree on the rules.

They were still shouting about it when Grok came into the guard-room and demonstrated the qualities that had made him the unchallenged leader of the band. He snatched up a club and knocked the pair of them down with a single blow.

"Stop mucking about, you dozy lot," he snarled. "There's work to be done." He gave them their orders. They were to scour the mountain tunnels - in bands of not less than four - from top to bottom, and find all those scattered orcs that he had heard the bar-room adventurers tallking about. Then they were to restring their bows, straighten their arrows, sharpen their scimitars, and put new spikes in their clubs. After that, there would be a couple of days square-bashing to lick them back into shape. Then, when they had been welded into an efficient fighting machine, they were going to march on the Orc's Head Tavern and knock seven bells out of those guide book merchants. Grok would teach those humans to sell tickets to his mountain!

The scouring of the mountain wasn't as profitable as Grok had hoped. They did turn up nine orcs that no-one had known about, but two of them had been so battered by adventurers that they were no use for anything apart from moving-target practice. Still, they were quite useful for that.

Re-equipping the troops could have been easier. Most of the orcs had lost most of their weapons in the route after the last battle, so they had to go and get new ones from the old armoury in the Dark Tower. This shouldn't have posed any problems, but Young Jack had taken a fancy to the place and wouldn't let the orcs near it. He turned Oleari and Samantha into frogs as soon as they set foot in it, and Grok had to club Flies to stop him from eating them. Fortunately, Grok still had his emergency rations - the female frog -

in his pocket, and she was pressed into service to restore his soldiers. Even that caused trouble! The female didn't fancy Oleari, nor did he fancy her, and they hopped off in different directions. The orcs managed to catch them, but couldn't get them to kiss and make up. In the end, Brainz had a brilliant idea. He gave them a single worm to eat, and their lips touched in the middle.

That sorted out Oleari, but it still didn't solve the problem of Young Jack. They could have ended up having to go into battle armed only with a few clubs and their own natural weapons - teeth, claws and bad breath - but they were saved from this by the intervention of Grok's girlfriend (as she was called behind his back). The female frog had hopped off into the Dark Tower in search of food or a mate - the orcs didn't know which, though Grok had a good idea. Young Jack tried out one of his words of command on her, and turned her into a barmaid - complete with a tray full of pewter tankards of beer. The last the orcs heard, before Young Jack led her off to an inner room and shut the door, he was explaining how you could get a really good sheen on pewter by polishing it with a beard, although the barmaid, not being a dwarfess and therefore not having a beard, might like to try it with her hair instead. Perhaps if she let it down, they could give it a try, Jack was heard to suggest as the door slammed shut.

"Now I wonder what'll happen if he gives her a kiss?" pondered Brainz.

"Who cares, as long as it takes him a few minutes to find out." said Grok, and hurried his orcs off to the armoury quickly, while there was still time.

Grok then tried to lick his undisciplined rabble into an army, but after two days he decided that enough was enough, and that it was time to lead his undisciplined rabble to war.

So one twilight towards the end of the following week, Grok and the twenty-three orcs that he had gathered into his band set off over the Orc's Tongue Bridge with murder in their hearts, bows and clubs on their backs, scimitars and arrows by their sides and mouse sandwiches in their pockets. Through the long night they marched, swiftly and silently, striking terror into the rabbits that they met on their way. (Grok was sure that they would have terrified anything, but rabbits were all that they met.)

As dawn broke the orcs stopped for a breather behind the long hedge that ran along the back of the tournament field. The Orc's Head Tavern lay quite still. The shutters had still not been thrown back from the windows, and smoke did not yet rise from the chimney.

12

Inside the tavern, Brandon slept fitfully. It had been very kind of Mr. Wallop to offer him bed and board for the week until the dragon came back again, but Brandon could not get used to the bed. After so many years of sleeping on hard stone floors, or in the - even harder - crook of the dragon's tail, the bed was just too soft.

He had tried sleeping on the floor instead, but that had its own problems. The Wallops had a dog. It might have been a guard-dog once; now it was more of a fire-guard. It certainlly kept everyone well away from the fire, for though old and slow, it still had a nasty temper. When the hearth grew cold in the middle of the night, the dog would look for somewhere warm to lie. And if Brandon was asleep on the floor, 'somewhere warm' meant on top of the dwarf. So Brandon lay safely on the bed, and dozed as best as he could.

But Brandon was also suffering from Landlord's Elbow, (not to be confused with Housemaid's Knee) and that kept him awake. Mr. Wallop's offer of bed and board had not been entirely out of kindness. With the orc gone and Young Jack still off playing at being an adventurer, the Orc's Head was without a pot-boy. Brandon was pressed into service. The dwarf didn't mind the washing and polishing - he was very good at that, having had lots of practice in the treasure chamber - but whenever he was working at the sink, and Mr. Wallop was serving at the bar, he had an attack of Landlord's Elbow. Every time Mr. Wallop pulled a pint, Brandon got an elbow in his left ear. It was getting quite sore.

Most of all though, Brandon was afraid that the orcs would attack before Saturday came round and the dragon would be back to keep him safe. He had also heard about the guide book merchants, and could guess how any orc would feel about that business. It was a reasonable bet that the orcs would be back to put a stop to that little caper. The only real question was 'When?'

At least he could rest easy over one thing. He had managed to persuade the magician-merchants to pack their bags and clear out while it was still safe. They had not been keen on the idea at first, and had poo-poo'ed Brandon's fears. But when adventurers (teleporting back for a swift jar or two) started telling tales of military manoeuvres and scimitar sharpening, the merchants changed their minds.

They had heard, so they said, that someone had invented something they called a printing press, and that with it they could produce guide books by the thousand, instead of having to scribble them out by hand, one by one. Unfortunately, it was rather a long way away, so they had better get started as quickly as possible. So, thanks for the lodgings, Mr. Wallop, and not to worry about trade, soon the Orc's Head Tavern would have customers by the score as the guide books reached a new and wider audience.

Yes, thought the wily dwarf, and not to worry about food, Mr. Dragon. Soon you will have a plentiful supply of fresh young adventurers. That should keep you busy, and give me a chance of getting my hands on some treasure - at last!

Oh, yes! Brandon knew what he was doing when he got the merchants away to safety. But it didn't solve his immediate problem, and he grew more nervous as each day passed.

Thus it was that Brandon was awake when the orcs arrived at the

tournament field. He had got up to stretch his legs - which was soon done - and was taking a bleary look at the new day through the gap at the bottom of the shutters, when he noticed a glinting in a gap in the hedge beyond. Something metallic was reflecting the first rays of the rising sun. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. His worst fears had been realised. It was an orc's helmet that glinted in the sun.

Brandon ran through the inn shouting "To arms! To arms! The orcs are attacking! Over there! Over beyond the field!"

There was a flurry of excitement and a rush for those windows that looked out across the green. The Wallops and their overnight guests watched as four orcs slipped furtively through gaps in the hedge.

"Ho, ho! Here comes my new set of bowls!" chuckled Barney. "Can't get on with those wooden things." he added as an afterthought.

"Let's go and get them!" cried a keen young adventurer.

Another four orcs appeared through the hedge.

"Ah, and there's a set for Gaffer Smithies," commented Barney.

The keen young adventurer counted heads in the tavern. There were nine of them, including Mrs. Wallop, Brandon and the dog. He slipped away quietly to pack his bags.

Another four orcs appeared.

". . . and a set for Old Norman. We'll be well equipped this season." Barney was delighted with the turn of events.

Mrs. Wallop brought him down to earth with a bump. "And who's going to collect them?" she asked, gesturing to the adventurers who were all disappearing in search of their belongings.

"Hmm. Perhaps we will need a bit of help." Barney turned to the dwarf. "Right, the missis and I will go and round up the troops. Master Brandon, you keep 'em busy till we get back." The dog growled to show it understood.

"And don't you let them come in here with their muddy boots on after traipsing across that field!" Mrs. Wallop added as she hurried after her husband.

By the time Brandon reached the front door, the Wallops were galloping off down the road on their old mare, and all that remained of the adventurers were a few wisps of smoke from the teleporting.

If the dwarf had run then, he might have got out of sight before the orcs reached the front of the tavern. But he didn't. He thought about Mr Wallop's silver measuring cups and went back to help himself to them. It only took a few seconds, and he might still have made it but for the dog. It saw him stashing the silverware in his pockets and stood with lips curled back and a deep growling in its throat, barking his way to the door. Brandon looked for another way out, but there wasn't one - not from that corner of the tap room.

13

Brandon was still trapped in the corner when the orcs burst in, brandishing their scimitars and howling wild war-cries. The dog turned round at the noise and began to snarl, but when it saw what it was up against, it slunk off and hid under a corner-seat. Frightening a three-foot dwarf was one thing, but a band of orcs was something else altogether. Besides, the dog's orders were to let no-one steal anything. The landlord hadn't said anything about no-dozens.

The orcs were a bit crestfallen when they realised that the guide book merchants had fled, and they'd only got a single, scared dwarf to vent their terrible rage on, but they decided to make do with him. They advanced across the room waving their wicked weapons willfully. Brandon was small, and scared, but he was also slippery. As the wall of orcs closed in on him, he dived between Spindleshanks' bandy legs and ran behind the bar. There, he dived down the cellar stairs and bolted the heavy trap-door behind him.

The orcs thundered in pursuit, but as they crushed into the space behind the bar they discovered something even more interesting than one puny dwarf. An amazing supply of booze! Bottles of every shape and size! Casks, jugs, barrels and beer pumps! Brandon was instantly forgotten.

They didn't give him another thought until the beer ran out several hours later. Grok - who had learnt about these things - knew that there were other barrels in the cellar. He pulled at the trap-door and remembered about Brandon.

"Hey, you lot," he shouted to his band, "it's time for pub games. We're going to play 'Smash the Dwarf'. Get this trap-door open and we'll start." Brandon had been quivering quietly in the cellar listening to the shenanigans that were going on overhead, so he heard about the new game that Grok had just invented. He decided that he didn't want to play and worked his way deeper into the barrels and crates that were piled high in the cellar. As he burrowed further back it got lighter, rather than darker, which surprised him until he realised that there was another entrance to the cellar, out in front of the pub, and that sunlight was filtering through the cracks in the wooden door.

He hurried over to it, stacked empty crates into a staircase, and climbed up. He eased back the bolt quietly, and cautiously lifted the door. He peeped out. All clear! He threw back the door, hauled himself out and began to run for it.

Meanwhile, the orcs had just managed to get into the inside trap-door in time to see Brandon disappear out the outside one.

"After him!" bellowed Grok.

Brandon ran as fast as his little legs would carry him. It was just an unfortunate fact of dwarvish life that little legs don't carry you very fast, so by the time he reached the tournament field, the orcs were close and gaining on him rapidly. A deep black shadow passed over him, matching the deep black despair he felt, for he believed that his end was nigh.

But how wrong he was, for the shadow was the shadow of the dragon coming in to land. As it swooped down low over the green, the orcs didn't wait to see what it would do. They turned and ran for their lives. The dragon

banked into a curve and came round to land bumpily in front of Brandon.

"Oooh!" it said as it stopped. "Hello, sweety. Having a spot of bother are you?"

"Oh, am I glad to see you, Puff!" exclaimed Brandon, quite forgetting his usual manners. "Those orcs nearly had me then."

"Nice to see you too, Brandon love. I was going to give that lot a roasting as I passed over them, but I didn't think it would do the grass much good. Wouldn't want to upset old Barney, would we? But where is he anyway?" The dragon looked round at the empty field. "And where's everybody else? Where are those pretty little striped tents, and the men in their tin suits, and all the lovely ladies? Where's the ox? What's going on? Don't they know it's Saturday?"

"But it's Friday," Brandon told him.

"Bother! All that flying again tomorrow! Still, I think I'm glad I came when I did." The dragon wrapped a protective claw around Brandon.

"So am I," said the dwarf with feeling.

"Shall we go home, Brandon?" it suggested.

"That's a good idea, Puff," he agreed, "I'm all behind with my polishing, and I've had an idea for re-arranging the Rings 'n' Things display."

"Brandon. . ." the dragon began.

"Yes, Puff?"

"If I promise to leave you my treasure in my will, will you promise to stop trying to steal it?"

Brandon considered the offer carefully. Being heir to a fortune had a certain appeal. "Yes, I will," he replied, as he climbed onto the dragon's back.

"There's just one thing, though," he added as they set off. "How long do dragons live?"

"Forever, sweety. Just like dwarves!"

14

"What now, Chief?" asked Brainz, as the orcs, cowering in the tavern, watched their victim fly away on the dragon's back.

Grok snarled with frustrated malice. "Burn down this place!" he ordered.

"But what about the booze!" cried Oleari and Grindleguts together. Grok had to think about that. "Carry what we can, and drink what we can't. He decided.

With forty-five gallons of beer, seventeen casks of applejack, twelve of brandy, eight barrels of mead, fourteen cases each of red, white and rose wine, uncountable bottles of stout, cider, barley wine, imported lager and various other foreign fluids, there was rather a lot that the orcs couldn't carry.

They were still trying to drink their way through the remainder when the Wallops came back - and they were not alone. They had bought with them Sir Cecil de Breeze and his men at arms, along with six knights and their retinues who were lodging with the de Breezes in readiness for the Saturday tournament; a patrol of the King's Horse that they had met on the road; the volunteers from Ambridge - mainly archers; Gaffer Smithies, Old Norman and the rest of the bowling club, all armed with scythes; and Mrs. Wallop and the members of the Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team.

Skraggit, who happened to be looking out of the window when they appeared, didn't know who they all were. Just that there were an awful lot of them. He reeled over to Grok and told him the news.

"Wassat?" said Grok. "You seen an army? He lurched over to the back window and peered drunkenly out. "Well, I can't see 'em."

"No, no, Chief. Over there." Skraggit waved an arm to point to the front of the tavern, but the gesture sent him reeling so that he finished up pointing out of Grok's window. Grok looked again, but still couldn't see any army.

"Right on, Skraggit," he said. "You seen 'em. You sort 'em out!" With that he went back to the serious business of emptying bottles.

"All right then, I will," said Skraggit. He steadied himself and lurched out to meet the army.

Sir Cecil had drawn up his command a hundred yards down the road from the tavern, out of bowshot. He saw the orc staggering slowly and stiffly up the road towards them and turned to Barney Wallop. "Looks like your pot-boy gave them a pasting. The fellow can hardly walk."

"I don't think he's pasted, Sir Cecil. I think he's plastered," replied Barney, who recognised the signs.

"You mean drunk! Pah! Disgraceful! Doesn't he know it's against the rules of war to be drunk on the battlefield?" Sir Cecil was disgusted. He spurred his steed down the road to meet the orc.

"I say, you fellow!" he called. "What's the meaning of this! How do you expect to fight in that condition?"

"I don't." replied Skraggit. He had had a bright idea on his way out from the tavern.

"What! A coward as well! Terrible." Sir Cecil bristled with rage. "I reshent that," said Skraggit, who had his pride. But he let it pass. "What I came to shee you about," he slurred, "wash thish. We demand a chight of fampions - a fight of machinons - a sight of pachi. . ."

"A fight of champions!!!" roared Sir Cecil.

"Thash it." Skraggit agreed. "It'sh our right you know."

Sir Cecil fumed, but his hands were tied by the ancient and honorable rules of chivalry. Sub-section 4 (Beseigement), paragraph C. "If the party of the first part, (the beseiged) shall request a Fight of Champions, then the party of the second part (the beseigers) shall acquiesce, provided that such a fight shall take place at a mutually agreed ground within three leagues of the place of beseigement and at a time within twenty-four hours of the initial request, and the fight shall be fought under the Rules of Single Combat. (See Sub-section 17. paragraphs D to Q..)"

"Where and when?" demanded Sir Cecil curtly.

"Back there," Skraggit waved wildly towards the tournament field and fell over. "Tomorrow" he finished, from the ground.

Sir Cecil snorted and returned to his troops. Skraggit hiccoughed and reeled back to the tavern.

Meanwhile, inside the tavern, Grok had at last looked out of the right window and seen the army of men. The sight of it was sobering - for him anyway, though he couldn't get the other orcs to take it seriously. He got out his long, leather-thonged whip and laid into them with it. That brought them round. He had found that you often need to have a whip round after a booze up. Only Grindleguts was still lying flat out under a table by the time Skraggit got back.

The orcs crowded round him, demanding to know what had happened. Having seen the size of the army that faced them, they were delighted to hear that they wouldn't have to fight, but there were some worried faces and lots of sudden attacks of splitting headaches, when Skraggit told them about the Fight of Champions. Grok settled that problem by volunteering Grindleguts.

"But he's useless!" protested Brainz. "What happens when he loses? The rules state that the party of the first part - that's us" he explained for the benefit of those not versed in contract law, " - has to surrender and we've forfeited the right to mercy by going for an FoC."

". . . An FoC?" echoed Oleari.

"Fight of Champions." Skraggit explained. He knew his Rules as well as Brainz.

"What happens to us," Grok said, "is nothing, because we won't be here. We're going to scarper tonight while it's dark."

"But we've got to have that fight," objected Skraggit. "It's the Rules of War."

"That's all right," Grok calmed him down. "There'll be a Fight of Champions. Grindleguts will stay here and do that for us - find some rope, Fatty, and tie him up to make sure - it's just that we won't stay to watch. There's nothing in the Rules that says we have to, is there?"

There wasn't, so as soon as it was dark, and the men had settled down to sleep around their campfires, Grok and his band slunk away into the night. Grindleguts slept tight, peacefully unaware of what his future held.

15

Their escape did not go entirely unnoticed. Mrs. Wallop had been prowling around the tavern, looking in through the windows to see what kind of a foul mess the orcs had made during their occupation. She was not pleased with what she saw, and was particularly annoyed when she noticed that her nice display of the cups that her Ladies Bowling Team had won had been scattered all over the place. "Wait till my Ladies hear about this," she murmured darkly.

She was still there when Grok's band slipped out of the little side door and scurried off down the road.

Mrs. Wallop bustled back to the camp and marched into Sir Cecil's pavilion. Sir Cecil was just about to retire to bed and had changed into his red flannel nightshirt - the one with the lace collar and cuffs and pale blue butterflies embroidered all over it, that his wife insisted he wore on campaigns because it was so nice and warm. He was rather put out to see her. That nightshirt was a well-kept secret known only to him, Lady de Breeze and his valet; and Sir Cecil wanted to keep it that way. He leapt into bed and pulled the covers up to his neck.

"Come back in the morning!" he barked.

Mrs. Wallop was not a woman to be put off that easily. "The orcs are running off!" she told him. "Get your men and get after them!"

"Have they all gone?" Sir Cecil was aghast at their ungentlemanly behaviour.

"There's one still there, but all the others are running away. You'll have to get a move on if you are going to catch them." Mrs. Wallop tried to spur him into action. "Come on! Get up and get moving!"

Sir Cecil was not getting out of bed while she stood there. In any case, there was no point. "I'm dreadfully sorry, dear lady, but my hands are tied..."

"...so were his, come to think of it," Mrs. Wallop mused.

"It's the Rules of War, madam. If their champion is there then the Fight of Champions is still valid, and under the Rules, all hostilities are suspended pending its result." Sir Cecil waved a hand over the bedclothes in a gesture of helplessness, then realised that the lace cuff was showing and hid it again quickly. "My men can do nothing."

"Well my Ladies can!" stormed Mrs. Wallop. "We aren't bound by your silly rules... We don't wear frilly nighties with butterflies on, either." She added over her shoulder as she left.

Sir Cecil pulled the bedclothes over his head. How would he face his men in the morning? Perhaps if he developed a cold and stayed in bed all day, they would be so busy jousting they would forget about his nightshirt. But what if they came in to see how he was?

Mrs. Wallop stomped off and rounded up her bowling team. She told them what was happening to their new sets of bowls, and what they had done to her display of cups. The ladies were furious. "Shall we go an get them ourselves?" she asked rhetorically.

"Indeed we shall!" they all chorused, then rushed off to get their husbands' scythes, and their own chopping baskets.

Within a few minutes they were off in hot pursuit, and as they marched they sang their team song:

"Some people think that orcs can be a nightmare,
But we believe that they can be a dream.
For we will go where neither man nor knight dare,
We're the Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team.

Some people like those modern bowls, made of wood,
And polish them until they shine and gleam,
But we think the old-fashioned ones are just as good,
We're the Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team.

Some people say the sight of orcs would scare them dead,
And when they see them they begin to scream,
But if you want to win you've got to get a head,
We're the Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team."

Their song echoed aross the moonlit plain. The orcs heard and ran.

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Grok and his band got back to the Orc's Head Tower ahead of the Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team, but not that far ahead. The orcs were still suffering from the after-effects of a hard day's drinking, and the lady bowlers were all remarkably spry for their age.

The orcs panted to a halt inside the mouth of the tower, and turned to look back at their pursuers. In the early morning light they could see that they had been running from eight old women. They hadn't realised that there were so few of them.

"Oh, come on! This is ridiculous!" protested Spindleshanks. "It won't take us two minutes to sort that lot out."

"Uh,Uh!" Grok shook his head. "That's Mrs. Wallop out there at the front of them. I'm not tangling with her. Oh, no!" He knew Mrs. Wallop.

"Perhaps the essential evil of this foul place will keep them away," suggested Samantha hopefully.

"Essential evil!!!" spluttered Grok. "Do you think a few nasty smells is going to put Ma Wallop off? Hah! You'll be lucky."

"Then we'll have to fight them," said Spindleshanks.

Grok was set against that idea, and cast around desparately for an alternative.

"The bridge!" Brainz broke in. "Destroy the bridge. They'll never get us then. We'll be safe!"

The others thought this was a great idea. "That really stinks, Brainz!" they said, clapping him on the back. But Grok was aghast.

"Destroy the bridge! Haven't I spent the last twenty years guarding the flaming thing? Destroy it! Wasn't my great-great-grandfather in charge of the slave gang that built it? Didn't he fill the ravine with corpses so that the builders had somewhere to stand? Destroy it? You must be. . ." he broke off as another chorus of the Bowling Team song drifted across the plain and reached his ears. ". . . How do we smash it quickly?" he asked Brainz.

"Um. . . I haven't got that far. . ." Brainz admitted.

"Well think quick!" shouted Grok, picking up Brainz and shaking him. "'Scuse I," said Oleari, stepping forward. "I was in demolition before I joined up. If we get the keystone out, the bridge should fall by itself. What we do is this. We give someone a big hammer and lower him down on a rope. He smashes up the keystone - that's the big one in the middle, you can see it sticking out a bit underneath - then leaps out the way when it starts to go, and we haul him up. I reckon we should work out of the nose. That would give us the best angle."

"Right, you two at the back nip off and find a rope and hammer for Oleari and meet us up in the left eyehole. Come on, lads." Grok put Brainz down and clapped a horny hand on Oleari's shoulder. Oleari was about to protest that he should be on top doing the supervising, not at the dangerous end of the rope, but the gleam in Grok's eye shut him up.

Three minutes later, Oleari was dangling at the bottom edge of the bridge banging feverishly on the keystone and cursing himself for opening his big mouth. The job was not as easy as he had thought. If he didn't hit the stone hard enough, nothing happened. But if he tried to get a good swing on the hammer, he would start to spin at the end of the rope. The bottom of the ravine was a terrifyingly long way away. On the other hand, the bowling team was a terrifyingly short way away.

The other orcs were clustered on the craggy nose shouting their encouragement.

"Go on, you pimply-faced berk. Hit it!" shouted Grok.

"Try a bit to the right. It looks powdery," suggested Brainz.

Oleari bashed on. A few more fragments flew off, but not enough. He stopped to wipe the sweat out of his eyes.

"Get back to work or I'll cut the rope."

Grok's words spurred him on to greater efforts, but the ladies drew even closer while the keystone remained still.

More of the orcs squeezed out onto the nose to see what was happening. Oleari bashed on. The ladies marched nearer. The keystone held firm. The rest of the orc band came out to watch.

The crack of rock sundering echoed off the mountain wall and across the plain. The orcs cheered. "Well done, Oleari!" they shouted.

Oleari stopped banging and looked up. "That wasn't me." he said. "By all the Noras! It was the nose!"

The orcs felt the rock of the nose move under their feet and scrambled over each other to get back into the eyeholes. Skraggit, who had been holding the rope, let it go and dived for cover with the rest. Oleari clutched at the keystone that he had been trying to smash a few brief seconds before and watched the rope fall past him.

He was still hanging onto it when the massive prow of the nose crashed down. The bridge shuddered under the impact, then crumbled and fell down and down into the ravine.

"I see Oleari managed to get the keystone out in the end," commented Brainz as he watched the demolition expert disappear. "I suppose he might as well let go of it now..."

The Orc's Head Tavern Ladies Bowling Team came to a halt on the opposite side of the ravine. Grok stuck his tongue out and laughed evilly. That was the only Orc's Tongue they were going to see. He ducked away from the eyehole quickly as a shower of stones flew through the air. One whistled past above his head, but most clattered harmlessly off the rocky face of the Orc's Head with its new snub nose.

Grok waited for more stones, then after a while peeped over the rim of the eyehole to see what was happening. Mrs. Wallop saw him and shouted. "Come out and fight like men."

"Not flaming likely!" Grok shouted back. "You come in here and fight like orcs." He laughed loudly until another shower of stones made him duck for cover.

"What now, Chief?" asked Brainz who was cowering beside him.

"Breakfast. I'm starving." Grok replied.

"What about that lot out there?" asked Brainz.

"They can't get in, don't worry. Besides, they'll have to go home and cook their husband's lunches soon."

"And what about Grindleguts?"

"He can cook his own." Grok had lost interest in the world outside. All he wanted was breakfast. "Oink." he bellowed, "What about some grub? Oink! Now where's he got to? Oink!"



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