

# AUSTRALIAN REALMS PRESENTS

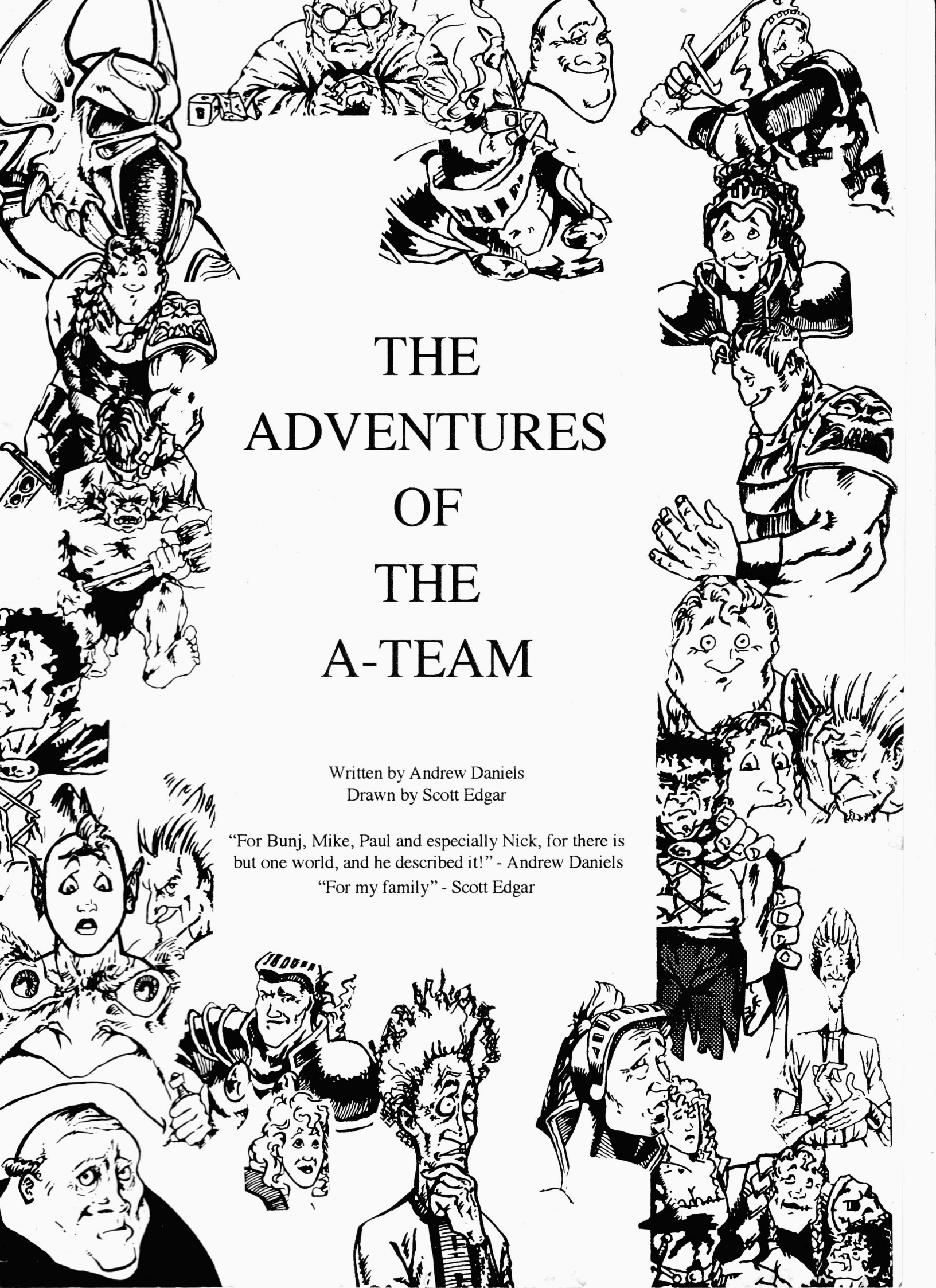
## THE ADVENTURES OF THE MAGE



BY ANDREW DANIELS & SCOTT EDGAR







# THE ADVENTURES OF THE A-TEAM

Written by Andrew Daniels  
Drawn by Scott Edgar

"For Bunj, Mike, Paul and especially Nick, for there is  
but one world, and he described it!" - Andrew Daniels

"For my family" - Scott Edgar

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

As Andrew explains below, it all began as a long-running fantasy roleplaying campaign. It was Andrew's genius that was able to translate our 'real life' roleplaying experiences into the comical Adventures of the A-Team. The first three episodes were run in Australian Realms magazine as a series of short stories immediately attracting enthusiastic fans. Customers were asking shop owners about the next release date of Realms because they wanted to find out "what happens next in the A-Team." They still do!

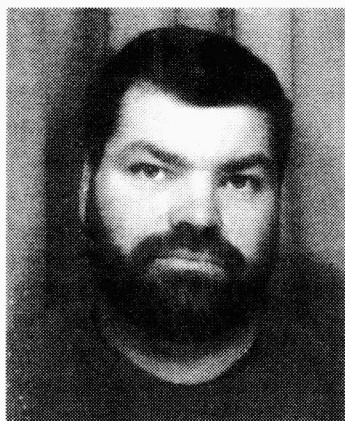
When Scott approached us with the idea of doing a comic strip in Realms, converting the Adventures of the A-Team from text to cartoon seemed the obvious way to go. Scott took to the project with great enthusiasm and dedication, and his characterisations have been a joy. We did not reckon on the loyalty of Andrew's fans, however - we received heaps of mail asking us to return to the story format. It is for these reasons that we present the first A-Team annual in both comic strip and story form.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their tremendous efforts in putting this book together. Andrew for doing a great job of recalling our humorous escapades and bringing them to life with wonderful characters and hilarious dialogue. Scott for having worked so very hard to illustrate Andrew's scripts with unique style and superb insight. Although these guys live thousands of miles apart they have managed to build a creative partnership that makes me laugh so hard I cry.

I also want to thank Mike Page for having the vision to make Australian Realms happen, and the faith in the A-Team for us to put out this book. And to Chi Cheng, Steve, and Colin for their contributions, many thanks. To Rae, Paul, Mike and Andrew for being truly amazing gamers and long friends. And most of all, thanks to all of you, the readers of Australian Realms and now the A-Team annual who have taken so warmly to Abel Zeek, Mango, Shana, Spud, Virgil and Wilson.

Virgil tells us, "Laughter is the hiding place of fools." Well, thank goodness we all have the courage to be foolish.

## ABOUT THE CREATORS



**Andrew Daniels**

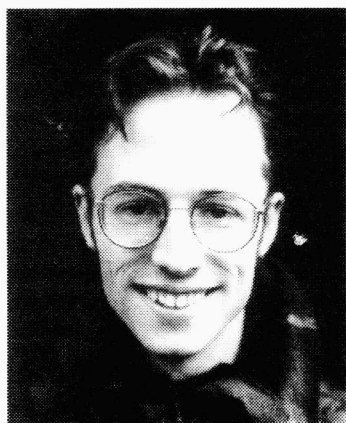
Andrew is 34, married with two wonderful children, works for the State (although he's trying not to make a habit of it) and worships the quadrivium of beer, diving, Everton Football Club and the keeping of tropical fish! Here is his story...

It began one Christmas, back in the early eighties. A pretty box, a couple of books of rules and a set of very odd-shaped die. Some Christmas present!

Then came the sly, "Guess what I got? Wanna play?" to anyone considered unstable enough not to fall about laughing at the thought of pretending to be a six foot tall elf with pointy ears and a sword (I still haven't got around to telling my Dad what I do with my Monday nights!).

Through the years they came and went. Many tried the game, few persevered. Sometimes there would be ten of us shouting to be heard through the chaos, sometimes two, struggling to stay awake through yet another goblin filled cave. But whenever the magic faded, something always caught you up and dragged you back from walking away with a cursory "it's only a game!". Usually it was those who jokingly called themselves the A-Team. Through the haze of chips, dip and cola, the humour and companionship never strayed far. This book contains their tales.

Enjoy.



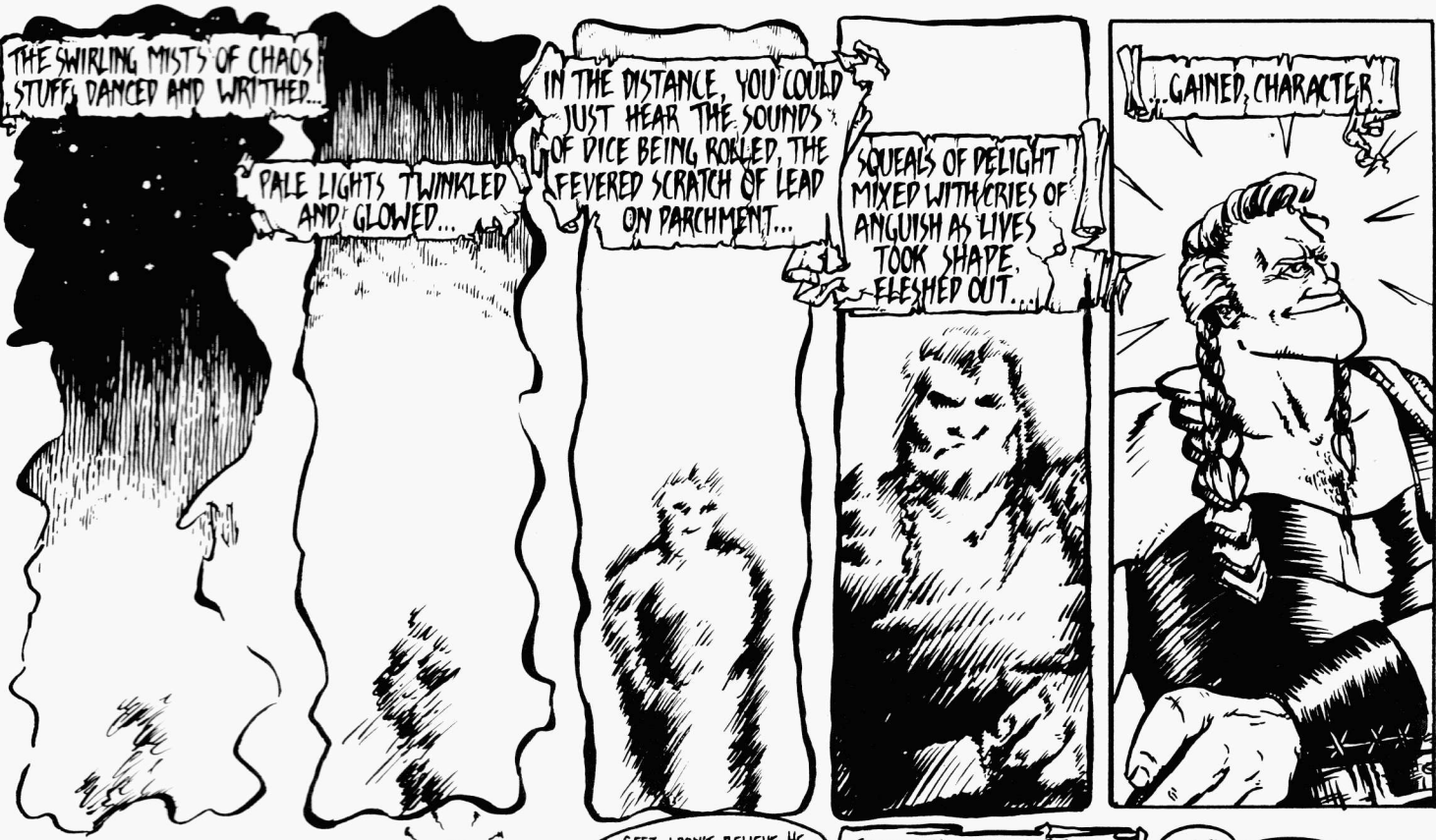
**Scott Edgar**

Scott is a 21-year-old illustrator and theatre designer, based in Prahran in Melbourne. Before coming to Australian Realms he worked freelance on illustrations for theatre publicity, as well as developing several of his own comicbook projects. Scott has been with Realms now for over a year and a half, working on the A-Team and straight illustrations within the magazine.

In addition to his illustration work, Scott designs set and costume for youth and student performance around Melbourne. He has just completed performing in the highly successful "Icarus Allsorts", a multimedia comedy which he co-wrote and for which he designed the set. The show was staged by the Victorian College of Arts, where Scott is currently studying.

Scott is into his tenth year of running an original AD&D campaign, and can be seen playing around Melbourne in his three-part comedy band Tripod.





THE SWIRLING MISTS OF CHAOS  
STUFF DANCED AND WRITHED...

PALE LIGHTS TWINKLED  
AND GLOWED...

IN THE DISTANCE, YOU COULD  
JUST HEAR THE SOUNDS  
OF DICE BEING ROLLED, THE  
FEVERED SCRATCH OF LEAD  
ON PARCHMENT...

SQUEALS OF DELIGHT  
MIXED WITH CRIES OF  
ANGUISH AS LIVES  
TOOK SHAPE,  
FLESHED OUT...

GAINED CHARACTER.



CLATTER



GEEZ, I DON'T BELIEVE HE  
TOOK THAT SPELL. WHAT  
A LOAD OF CRAP.

FAINT SHADOWS DRIFT IN AND  
OUT OF THE TWILIGHT, ON  
THE EDGE OF HEARING,  
DISTANT SOUNDS.

ECHOES OF OTHER  
PEOPLE AND PLACES.  
PASTS LONG GONE,  
FUTURES YET TO  
ARRIVE.

HOW COME DO THEY  
ALWAYS GIVE US SUCH  
SHIT NAMES?

WHAT?  
OH, HI, DIDN'T  
NOTICE YOU THERE.  
WILSON'S THE NAME.  
WILSON WORKME.



SEE? NONE THE  
SAME TO YOU! WILSON!  
BLOODY RIDICULOUS!



OH, I PUNNO. QUITE  
LIKE IT MYSELF.

ANYWAY, LOOKS  
LIKE I'M YOUR  
MAGE.



PLEASE YOURSELF  
THEM.



LET ME GUESS, CLERIC.



GOT IT IN ONE. ABEL ZEEK'S THE NAME.

SEE YOU GOT A DECENT ONE...

DON'T WORRY ABOUT HIM. YET TO MEET A FIGHTER WITH ENOUGH SENSE TO MAKE HIM WORTH TALKING TO.



WILSON'S THE NAME.

SO WHO'S THE LUCKY GOD, THEN? TYR, RA, FREYA?

ER, NOT QUITE.

MY GOD'S NAME IS SHANNAFRIA.

BLESS YOU. GOT A COLD, HUH?



NO, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. THAT WAS NO SNEEZE. IT'S THE NAME OF MY GOD.

SHANNAFRIA.

NEVER HEARD OF HIM.

HER.

ME NEITHER.



A THOUSAND PERFECTLY USEFUL DEITIES TO CHOOSE FROM AND I GET A MASTER WHO INVENTS ONE OF HIS OWN.

NOT ONLY THAT. HE MAKES ME THE ONLY CHARACTER ALIVE WHO BELIEVES IN HER!

WHAT KIND OF START IN LIFE DOES THAT GIVE YOU?



IT GETS WORSE. LOOK AT THIS! THIS IS MY HOLY SYMBOL! A STINKING DOVE'S FEATHER!

THAT WILL CERTAINLY INSPIRE FEAR IN THE HEARTS OF ENEMIES.



YEAH, AND ANOTHER THING—

GEZZ!

GET A LOAD OF THAT!



SHANA. ELVEN RANGER FIRST CLASS.



YO, BABE.

NICE NAME—



FIRSTLY, DON'T MAKE THE MISTAKE THAT I AM THE LIGHT RELIEF FOR THE GROUP.

SECONDLY, TOUCH ME AND I'LL CUT YOUR NUTS AND BOLTS OFF, METAL HEAD.



RIGHT THEN. THAT'S SORTED OUT.

NOBODY TOUCHES THE BABE.

HOW MANY'S THAT, THEN. FOUR.

WE'RE MISSING A— EEEK!



—THIEF.











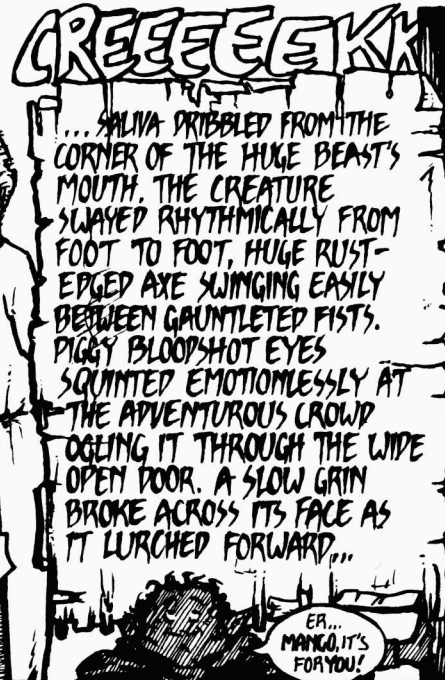
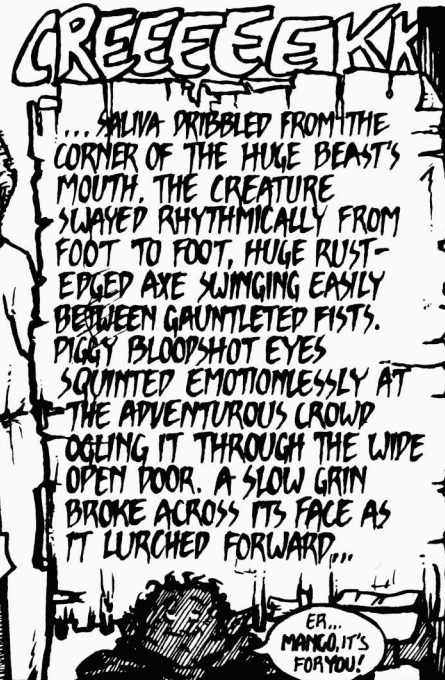
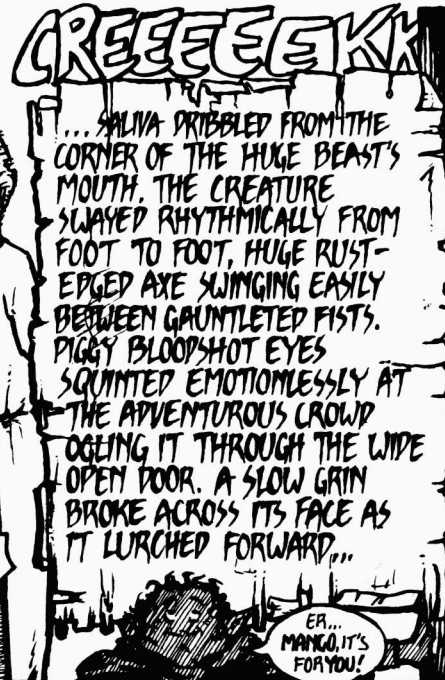
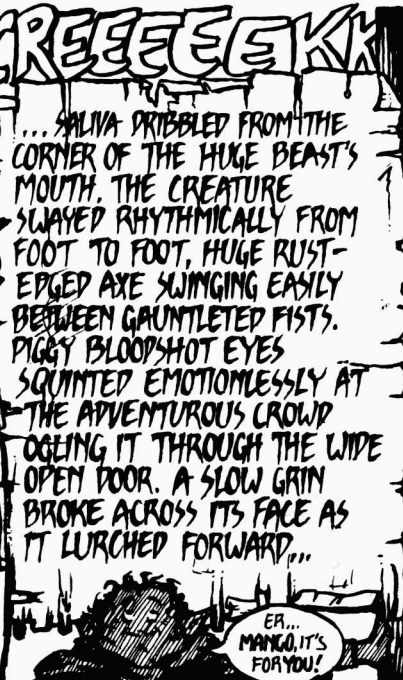
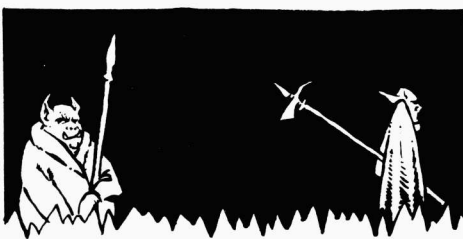










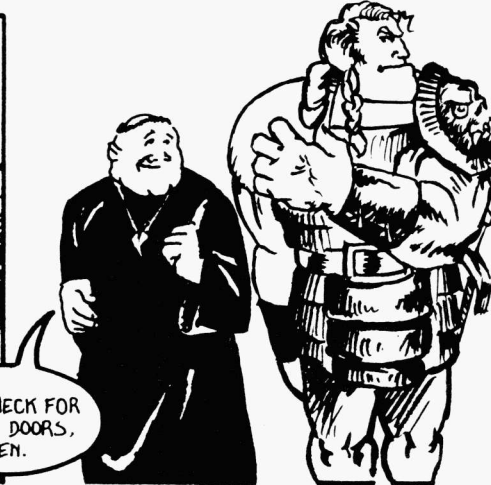


























THE A-TEAM HAD FACED DANGER MANY TIMES BEFORE. BLOOD-CURDLING TERRORS THAT WOULD CHILL THE MOST REDOUBTABLE ADVENTURERS TO THEIR VERY MARROW HAD BEEN MERE SIDE ISSUES TO THIS MERRY BAND THAT KNEW ABSOLUTELY NOTHING OF THE WORD FEAR. BUT NOW MANGO THE MAGNIFICENT, GREATEST WARRIOR OF A MIGHTY CLAN, HAD GONE MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD.





THE BRUDDY JANITOR!  
DOUG AND DAVE'S CLEANING SERVICES.  
NO JOBS TOO DIRTY, THAT'S OUR MOTTO!  
WHO THE BRUDDY HELL DO YOU  
THINK CLEANS UP AFTER  
YOU BUGGERS?

WELL, WHAT ARE  
YOU DOING HERE IN THE  
MIDDLE OF AN ACTION-  
PACKED ADVENTURE?

THERE'S NOT  
SUPPOSED TO BE  
ANYONE IN HERE FOR  
ANOTHER WEEK OR SO,  
SO WHAT THE BRUDDY  
HELL ARE YOU  
DOING HERE?

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE TEAM,

ALRIGHT!

FOR  
VEENA'S SAKE! WE HAVE  
DEMOCRATICALLY DECIDED THAT  
OUR NEW LEADER IS VIRGIL  
BECAUSE IT IS GOD'S WISH, AND  
OTHERWISE HE'LL SULK AND WE  
WON'T HAVE ANY  
FIGHTERS AT ALL!

AGREED?  
RIGHT THEN!

LET'S GET  
ON WITH THIS  
ADVENT-

CRASH!

BLOODY  
HELL!

WHERE  
DID THEY  
COME  
FROM?

WHO'S  
SUPPOSED TO BE  
ON WATCH?

ERR...

AND, ON THE OTHER SIDE  
OF THE LABYRINTH...

...AND SO, THERE  
YOU HAVE IT. OUR STORY  
IN A NUTSHELL. WE HAVE  
COME TO RETRIEVE  
THE GIRL.

GIRL?

YES, THE GIRL.  
WHATSENAME. YOU  
KNOW, SO AND SO'S  
DAUGHTER.

CREAM BUN  
ANYONE?

OH, HER.

WELL, OFF THE  
RIGHT TRACK, AREN'T  
YOU?

WHAT?

TURNED LEFT AT THE  
BOTTOM OF STAIRS 15B,  
DIDN'T YOU?

WELL...

SHOULD HAVE GONE  
RIGHT, THROUGH SECRET DOOR  
18! AND UP THE  
TOWER...

THIS IS PARKING'S  
DEEP DUNGEON OF  
DEMONIC DEATH!

NONONO! WE'RE  
TONEY'S TOWER OF  
TERRIBLE TRIBULATIONS,  
LEVELS 4 TO 6!

LOOK, WHAT ARE YOU  
GIBBERING ABOUT?

ONLY  
THIS, LITTLE  
LAD. YOU'VE  
GONE THE  
WRONG WAY!  
TAKEN THE  
WRONG TURN,  
YOU MIGHT  
SAY.

SOMEONE'S BUGGERED UP BADLY.

ANYWAY, I  
THINK SHE'S A  
SACRIFICE, SO THAT'LL  
BE DOWN IN THE PENTAGON  
ROOM. SHE'LL BE A LITTLE  
BUSY NOW. SACRIFICE  
STARTED TEN  
MINUTES AGO...

UM- YOU WOULDN'T  
HAPPEN TO HAVE SEEN  
THE REST OF THE  
PARTY, WOULD YOU?

YOU KIDDING?

RIGHT  
THEN. TIME  
TO FINISH  
THIS.

AND ALL  
ALONE,  
TOO!

SEeya  
NEXT  
ISH!

# THE ADVENTURES OF THE A-TEAM

BY EDGAR + DANIELS

THE BOTTLES OF POP WERE DRAINED. THE LAST OF THE NIBBLIES SCOFFED. A WRY SMILE SETTLED ON THE MURDEROUS VISAGE OF THE LORD OF THE POLYGONS. THE A-TEAM TRAPPED! SURROUNDED! AND WORSE STILL, THEIR HEROIC LEADER MISSING. A DOOMED LOOK DESCENDED ON THE MERRY BAND. IT SEEMED THAT THE END WAS NIGH...

LOOKS BAD.

SURE DOES. THAT'S THE LAST OF THE CREAMS. DOWN TO JUST PLAIN BIKKIES NOW.

WELL, DULY ELECTED LEADER...

WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?

HMMM... NOW WHAT WOULD MANGO DO IN THIS SITUATION?

WHAT HE ALREADY HAS. BOLT FOR THE NEAREST DOOR!

NOT A BAD PLAN, THAT. TOO MANY ORCS IN THE WAY.

ONLY ONE THING LEFT TO DO THEN.

WE'LL HAVE TO KILL THEM ALL.

WHAT!?

THERE'S MILLIONS OF THEM! HOW WE GONNA KILL ALL OF 'EM?

METHODICALLY, BUT WITHOUT MALICE, FOR THAT IS OUR WAY!

ELSEWHERE...

DAMN IT THEN!

IF THAT'S THE WAY THEY FEEL, I'LL JUST BULGER OFF BY MYSELF!

(CONVENTIONAL A-TEAM LEFT-HAND TURN)

RIGHT!

EEEEK! HELP! OH, HELP ME MANGO!

RIGHT!

A-TEAM SACRIFICE AND RESCUE THIS WAY RIGHT!

OHMM...

DRAAT!

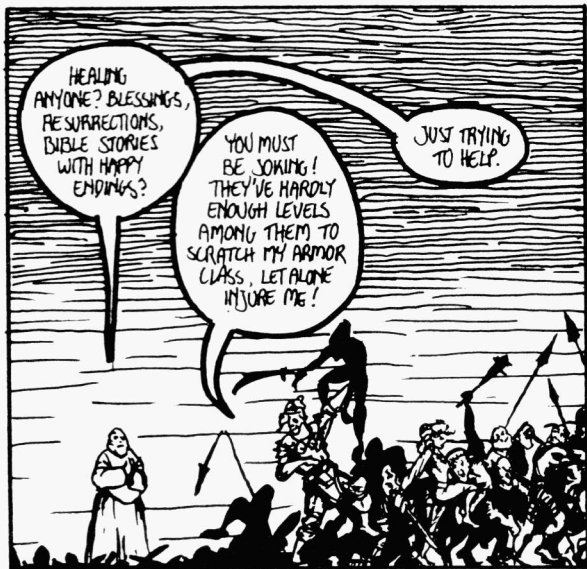
SOME GAYS HAVE NO SENSE OF HUMOUR!

YO! BRILL! LOW LIFE, TWO HITS PER ROUND! DON'T YOU JUST LOVE FIRST LEVEL GREEBLIES!

YUP... ALL SEEMS A BIT TOO EASY...

JOYS OF LOW ARMOR CLASS!







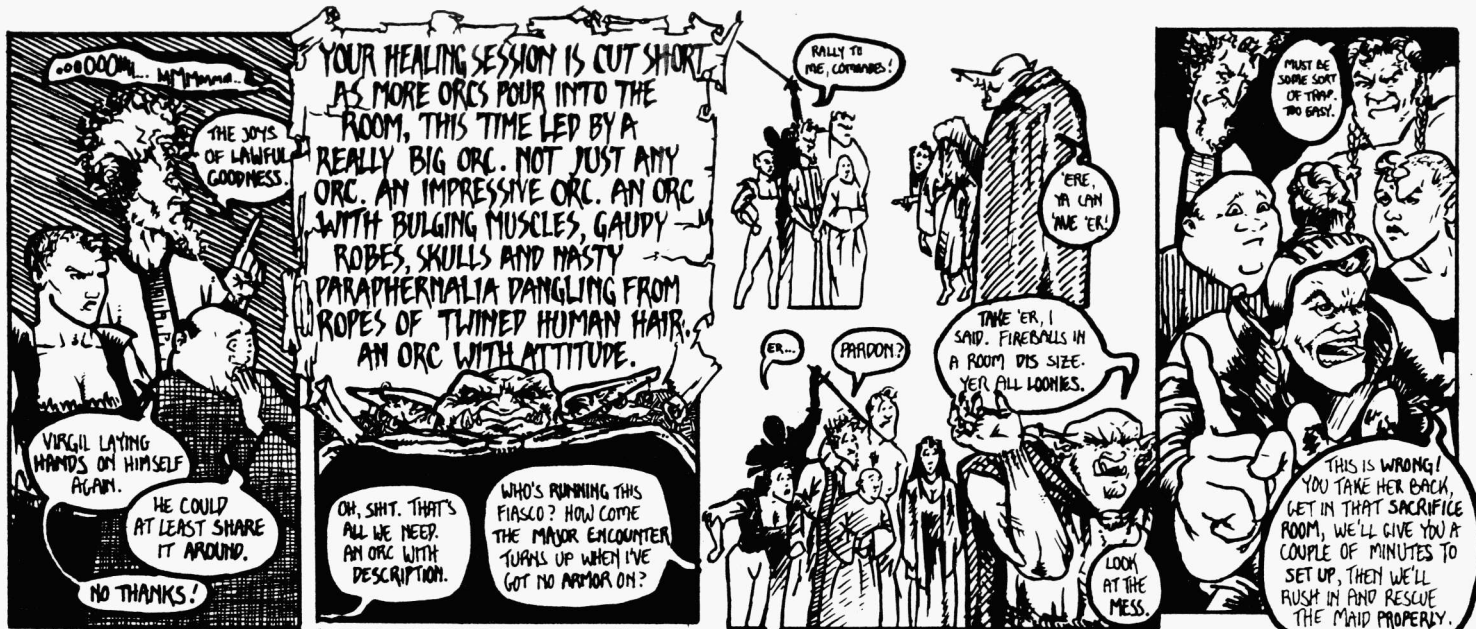


# THE ADVENTURES OF THE

THE FIRESTORM DIED, AND SO TOO HAD AT LEAST ONE MEMBER OF THE MIGHTY A-TEAM. BUT WITH ALL THE ORCS DESTROYED AND MANGO RETURNED, QUEST'S END IS IN SIGHT...









# A MAIDEN MISADVENTURE

## I: What's In A Name?

*The swirling mists of Chaos stuff danced and writhed, pale lights twinkled and glowed. In the distance, you could just hear the sounds of dice being rolled; the fevered scratch of lead on parchment; squeals of delight mixed with cries of anguish as lives took shape, fleshed out, gained character.*

*There came a sharp rustle and clatter, then the Chaos stuff slowly pulled aside to reveal a huge muscular figure glistening in freshly silvered mail. He brushed aside his flowing golden mane, checked the sword hung at his side, then methodically tightened the numerous straps and buckles that held his armour tight.*

*Another clatter, another figure slowly formed. This one thin, lithe, furtive, clad in a colourful rune-robe. He paused, looking cautiously about him, then spilled the contents of a leather backpack onto the ground. He quickly picked up the thin tome and earnestly perused its pages.*

"Geez, I don't believe He took *that* spell. What a load of crap."

Faint shadows drifted in and out of the twilight. On the verge of hearing, distant sounds echoed of other people and stranger places. Pasts long forgotten, futures yet to arrive. The newly formed pair, however, went about their business apparently concerned with other, more pressing matters.

"How come do they always give us such shit names?" cursed the heavily armoured, hulkish figure.

"What? Oh, hi! Didn't notice you there. Wilson's the name. Wilson Wormke." The thin man extended a pallid hand. The hulk ignored it, scowling furiously.

"See! Done the same to you. Wilson! Bloody ridiculous."

"Oh, I dunno," Wilson replied, "quite like it myself. Anyway, looks like I'm your mage."

The hulk scowled even more furiously, closely examining the freshly honed blade of his long sword.

"Please yourself then," said Wilson, withdrawing his hand.

Chaos billowed again. A third figure appeared. Round, a lardy ball on wobbling legs dressed in a flowing cassock.

"Let me guess, cleric," Wilson conjectured.

"Got it in one. Abel Zeek's the name."

"See you got a decent one," muttered the hulk.

"Don't worry about him. Yet to meet a fighter with enough sense to make him worth talking to," said Wilson.

"Yeah," agreed the cleric.

"Wilson's the name." The pair shook hands warmly "Who's the lucky god this time then? Tyr? Ra? Freya?"

"Er, not quite. My god's name is Shannafria."

"Bless you. Got a cold, huh?"

"No, you don't understand. That was no sneeze, it is the name of my god, Shannafria," Abel Zeek explained glumly.

"Never heard of him," Wilson said, suppressing a snigger.

"Her," corrected Zeek. "Me neither. A thousand perfectly useful deities to choose from and I get a master who invents one of His own. Not only that, He makes me the only character alive who actually believes in her. What kind of start in life does that give you?"

Wilson nodded sagely, beginning to doubt Zeek's sanity.

"It gets worse. Look at this!" Zeek waved a little feather around his head. "That is my Holy Symbol, a stinking dove's feather!"

"That will certainly inspire fear in the hearts of enemies," Wilson commiserated.

"Yeah, and another thing...", Zeek's tirade halted with a gasp as Wilson's bony elbow dug into his chubby midriff.

"Geez! Get a load of that."

From out of the swirling mists slid a magnificent example of the feminine form. Tall, perfectly proportioned and wearing an extremely close fitting set of leather buckskins, a young elven maid strode confidently towards the little group. Wilson smiled, Zeek attempted a bow but gave up midway when his belly refused to crease, and the hulk shook back his golden locks and manfully pushed forward his chest.

"Shana, elven ranger first class," she announced.

"Yo, babe, nice name...", began the hulk.

"Firstly," Shana cut across him, "please don't make the mistake that I am the light relief for the group. Secondly, touch me and I'll cut your nuts and bolts off, metal head." The hulk's chest deflated like a popped balloon.

"Right," said Wilson, "that's sorted out; nobody touches the babe. How many's that then, four? We're missing a...",



Shana squealed. From behind her, a form, barely four feet tall, appeared with a face that would make a troll retch.

"...thief." Wilson finished.

"Spud at your service," said the hideous thing, "halfling master thief, master merchant and...", here he balanced a skillet by its handle on the end of one finger, "...master chef."

"Halfling, my eye!" Shana revolted. "Halflings are cute, lovable little creatures. You're..., well..., plain horrible!"

"Yeah," agreed Spud, "charisma throw wasn't what it could've been. Still, gotta get along with what you've got." He leered at Shana who quickly turned away to prevent the vomit in her throat rising further.

This chatter came to an abrupt halt as the air was rent by a resounding crash and flash of lightning. From a hole torn through the stuff of Chaos, rimmed in a blinding light that silhouetted his tall form, strode a man dressed in filigreed plate mail. Tousled red plumes sprang from his closed helm, and a mighty shield embossed with bold heraldic signs swung on his arm as he bounced into the midst of the party.

"Oh no," Wilson groaned.

"I am Virgil!" the hero's voice boomed in his helm. "Knight Paladin! Defender of the Realm! Protector of the Weak! Scourge of Evil! Saviour of the..."

"Al'right, al'right," Wilson butted in, "we get the picture. Just cut out the self-adulation while I'm around will you?"

"Sure," beamed the paladin, "just trying to make a point. Well, who are my worthy companions in our upcoming adventure?" He slapped Abel Zeek's back, almost causing the cleric to choke on the bagel he had been nibbling.

"What? Oh, well I'm Wilson the mage, this is our cleric, Abel Zeek, Shana is the ranger, Spud, the thing, and err..., we never did catch your name." He turned to the blushing hulk. "Come on, spit it out. Can't spend the rest of our lives calling you 'the fighter' now, can we?"

"Mnmnng," the fighter mumbled.

"What?"

"Mannggn the Magnificent."

"Pardon, still didn't quite catch it?" Wilson pursued.

"I said," his voice embarrassingly loud, "MANGO THE MAGNIFICENT!"

The group fell as one to its knees, creased in communal laughter, Zeek's flabby face exploding munched bagel. Mango fiddled with theommel of his sword and cursed the Player who had named him.

## II: Spot The Plot Device

*The Inn buzzed. In fact it positively vibrated with the life of the newly formed. Not unexpectedly, the archetypical fat innkeeper entertained his guests with his as yet limitless supply of bonhomie type barman tales. Typically luscious bar-wenchs with cleavages out of Boys Own Fantasy scampered about with foaming pots of ale between tables full of happy, smiling customers. A typically merry time was being had by all.*

*At the stereotypical corner table, our party of adventurers sat merrily quaffing fine ales and other assorted alcoholic beverages paid for with the coinage of the inevitably fat cleric's, typically fat purse. The paladin excepted, of course;*

*Virgil sat moodily supping a large orangeade mumbling something about...,*

*"One's body is a temple, you know."*

"Look," Wilson slurred, "I can't stand it any more, I've got to ask; what the heck is that sticking out of your backpack?"

Abel Zeek puffed his cheeks haughtily, "it is a ten foot pole. What does it look like?"

The party, except for Virgil the paladin, "Laughter is the hiding place of fools!", fell about laughing hysterically.

"What's it for?" asked Shana the ranger, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Baton twirling!"

"Well there must be a use for it, or else He wouldn't have chosen it for me to carry would He!"

"Don't you have trouble getting through doorways with it?" asked Spud the thief, merrily, "I mean you can just barely squeeze through as it is, mate."

"No I do not," returned Zeek coldly. "And I'll thank you to...", Zeek was cut short by the appearance of an old but extremely well dressed man. Pretty much your archetypical rich merchant type plot device.

"Look out, lads," said Mango the Magnificent, "we're on."

"Gentlemen...", the old man began.

"And lady," interjected Virgil.

"Erm, yes quite. As I was saying, gentlemen and lady, I...",

"Here, old man, take the weight off," interrupted Mango.

"Er, thank you," said the man, sitting. "My name is...",

"Here, buy the old geezer a drink," said Spud.

"Thank you, but I would prefer...",

"What!" said Zeek, "looks like he's got all the money. Let him buy." The others nodded in agreement.

"Yes, I'll gladly buy you all a drink if you would just let me fin...",

"How rude," Virgil protested, "he's our guest, we should...",

The old man rose to his feet. "Will you people SHUT UP!"

Silence fell on the group except for Virgil who mumbled under his breath, "Just trying to make a point."

"Now. As I have been trying to say for the last ten minutes, I came here to ask you to undertake an errand of mercy for me."

"We knew that," said Mango.

"Right up our alley," said Virgil.

"Touchy old bugger," said Spud.

"Your buy!" said Wilson, hopefully.

The merchant sighed resignedly and ordered a round. Drinks in hand, the party fell silent again. "As I have been trying to say, my name is Ergmund...",

"Lucky bastard," Mango grumbled.

"...and two days ago my daughter, Rowena, was captured by a roving band of orcs who have taken her to their lair to have their wicked way with her, or worse still, to attempt to extort large amounts of cash off me."

"Yeah, good, heard that one before. Two more pints here, ta love," said Wilson with typical lack of interest.

"And I would like you mighty adventurers to return her safely..."



"Yeah, love to, but we're a bit busy right now, see," explained Wilson.

"Seem to have missed an important piece of the business here," butted in Shana, "the question of price...,"

Virgil rose to make a speech, puffing out his chest. "Come now, my worthy fellows, and lady, we cannot reduce this man's sad plight to such tawdry levels of pecuniary interest."

"Too bloody right we can. How much?" Spud chipped in.

"I can offer 100 geepees each," replied Ergmund, his face turning red as the group burst out laughing. "Times are hard, business is not what it used to be, you are my last hope...,"

"Really?" Shana giggled, "That wouldn't even pay my lingerie laundry expenses for such a task, let alone recompense the dangers faced."

"100 gold pieces for facing a band of raving orcs? Bugger off!" said Spud.

"Another pint of ale here," Mango added to the discussion.

"I'm sorry, old son," Wilson patted the merchant on the back, "but the general consensus appears to be a big NO."

The air chilled. Sounds of merriment receded and the inn faded slowly into darkness until only the party remained, bathed in an intense circle of light. The atmosphere took on a distinctly icy edge.

"Oops!" Zeek buried his face in his tankard as the others looked around in consternation. A frail, painfully thin, bespectacled gent appeared above the centre of the table. Around his neck a thick chain of multicoloured polygons clinked together with a sound like the rapped knucklebones of the about-to-be-dead. Cold myopic eyes froze the group.

The voice of one who knows exactly how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and how to deal with the silly prancing buggers, spoke out. A voice of ice, honed to razor sharpness by years of splitting hairs; hairs still attached to heads, mostly. *"It would appear there is some reluctance to follow the plot in this group."*

"Erm, not really," attempted Wilson.

"SILENCE!"

Wilson bit his lip and wondered about his next half dozen saving throws.

"You all know who I am?"

"Well no, not really," answered Virgil. Shana elbowed the paladin's ribs with an audible clank.

"He's new," Mango explained.

"I am the Keeper of the Manuals!"

Thunder crashed. Lightning flickered, flashing off the rims of the Keeper's spectacles, and other hackneyed effects played ominously in the background. *"I am the Lawgiver and you will obey my commands to the letter."*

"But I can't read," Mango complained.

"Whose round is it?" yawned Wilson.

The Keeper sighed heavily. *"For your benefit, puny and insignificant ones, I will again explain the first and most important Unwritten Rule of Adventuring. When I introduce a plot device leading to an adventure what do you do?"*

"We take it!" chorused the group.

"Good. That's much better." The figure faded as the sights and sounds of the inn coalesced back into view.

Mango turned to the befuddled merchant. "Ere, that deal of yours, Ergmund, start tomorrow early enough?"

### III: The Leadership Crisis

*Our little band of adventurers stand suspended at the edge of a small wooded vale. They watch disinterestedly as a scrub covered hill forms hazily in the middle distance, as the Master of the Polygons drones on...*

*"...its crown surmounted by a squat tower surrounded by a wooden palisade. Both ivy-clad tower and wall are in urgent need of repair...,"*

"This it then?" Spud, the gruesome halfling thief asked.

"Must be, he only ever describes the dangerous bits," Mango replied, making last minute adjustments to his gear.

"Yep, pretty obvious. Walled palisade. Ruined tower. Dungeon-riddled hill. Looks like all your standard ingredients," said Wilson rooting through spell components.

*"...a babbling brook hurries across the lower reaches of the scree..."*

"Why do we dally? The young maiden, Rowena, is in grave danger," Virgil, the paladin chaffed.

"She is now we're here!" Spud grinned.

*"...a brace of marsh hen take flight from the weedy scrub covering the lower slope."*

"She'll be al'right, pretty boy," said Shana, stringing her bow. "The scene with the girl, the cleaver and the cooking pot won't start rolling until we're there to see it happen."

"Yeah, one of the Unwritten Laws of Adventuring, the demon never turns up until we walk through the door," muttered Wilson, bemusedly examining a wriggling carp.

*"Dappled sunlight plays across the backs of the horses as they nuzzle each other nervously..."*

"Any big monsters, yet?" asked Spud.

"Nope," said Wilson, tossing the carp to a grateful Zeek.

"Did anyone remember to bring the bread rolls?" asked Zeek.

*"...the long green grass before you..., um..., sways gently in the breeze..., ah, bugger it..."* The omnipresent droning stopped. There was a brief sound like a sigh from the heavens.

"Right, thank Shannafria that's over with," said Wilson cheerily. "First things first. What we'll do is..."

"Hold on a minute," interrupted Mango. "Who died and left you archlich?"

"Well, I just thought..."

"Well don't, I do all the thinking around here. As leader of this party, I..."

"Leader! Elected by whom?" asked Wilson.

Shana looked at Spud, then wishing she hadn't, gulped back the bile. Zeek buried his head in a saddle bag. "Knew I'd put this somewhere," he said, triumphantly holding aloft a thoroughly squished sticky bun. "Tea anyone?"

"Adventurer's Code, bucko!" continued Mango ignoring the interruption. "Highest ranking warrior always calls the shots." He tousled his long yellow locks. "Always has done."

"Adventurer's what?" scoffed Wilson. "Just 'cos you're best at thuggery."

"How about Shana for leader. I'd rather follow her anytime," said Spud leering.

"Right then!" said Mango miffed. "Break with ten years of tradition, see if I care! I'm off to Brasso me gorget."



"Now look what you've done, Wilson. You know Mango's so sensitive," said Shana patting her horse.

"Blondes!" Wilson threw up his hands. "I'll tell him we had a vote and he won."

A few hours later a beautifully picturesque sunset hid coquettishly behind the distant tower but the moment was completely wasted on the A-Team, all they noticed was one moment it was day, the next, night.

"Time to go," Mango growled above his sparkling gorget. Along the stockade palisade, a pair of orc guards swung in a slow lumbering gait. Spud turned to the A-Team smiling.

"Five minute turn around. Plenty of time. Up the wall there, knife the fat one, along the walkway, knife the thin one. Rope down the wall, haul up the clanky thumpy folk and on to victory. Easy."

Wilson asked, "And if they don't die with one knife stab?"

Spud pulled a thin blade from a lined pocket in his boot. A sticky yellow substance dripped slowly from the wickedly pointed tip. Spud sniggered. "They *always* die from one stab!"

Wilson nodded approvingly, but Virgil shuddered with revulsion. "Surely, ugly Spudling, even one as lowly as you would not stoop to battle with such a tainted weapon?"

"Battle? No. Murder, yes!"

"This is not the honourable way to conduct a rescue. We should call out their leader and offer them terms," said Virgil.

"Terms! Talk to orcs. That's a new one," said Mango. "When was the last time we did that?"

"Scrofula's Deep, back in '79," said Wilson, "Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. That time we got a whole sentence out before getting bored and fireballing the lot of 'em."

"I remember. The orcs looked like scorched marshmallows afterwards. I wonder if there's a kitchen in this one?" Zeek's more than ample tummy rumbled.

"Er, just the one other thing before we go," said Shana, the ranger. "What are we going to do about the horses?"

"Same as always," Wilson replied, "hobble them and leave 'em here."

"Will they be safe?" Shana asked.

"Who gives a rat's arse," Mango spat. "Never in all my adventuring days have I known a group return for the horses. Always come out of the dungeon leagues from your starting point. Must be hundreds of starving tethered horses scattered across the multiverse waiting for adventurers who've bugged off!" Shana looked horrified.

"Damn the horses!" Spud lovingly turned over the goeey-bladed knife in his hand. "This stuff cost more than all of them put together. It won't stay fresh forever."

"I still cannot condone the use of illicit substances," Virgil announced. "I will not allow it."

"Horses have feelings you know," Shana simpered.

The skewed gears in Wilson's devious mind could almost be heard grinding and clacking into place as he formulated the perfect solution. "Shana has a point, the horse's left alone might get eaten by something..." he said cagily.

"What a waste," said Abel Zeek.

"... Someone clever and brave should lead them to a safe corral somewhere in the woods back there. Any volunteers?" Wilson asked without so much as a glance at the paladin.

Right on cue Virgil raised his hand. "I shall be proud to take on this perilous task."

"Great," said Wilson, as he watched the paladin lead the horses away. The mage turned to Spud, "Off you go then, he'll be back soon enough."

Spud silently scampered off. His backpack tied down, the little thief looked like a hunchbacked spider as he scaled the wooden wall with ease. The others watched as first one, then the other orc disappeared behind the parapet.

"Nice," admitted Wilson begrudgingly.

Upon Virgil's return the party moved to the wall which proved to be easily climbed with the aid of Spud's rope. Once over the wall and into the courtyard, however, they were surprised by a beast whose poor description was its downfall.

"What ho! Die you fiend from Hell!" shouted Virgil as he spitted the stockade's resident porker. The pig grunted then lay still. Death is swift for a one-stab creature.

"You steaming great twit!" Wilson spat.

The others looked down at Virgil's kill. Zeek paused to cut a haunch off the 'fiend from hell'. "For later," he explained.

The bold band made a beeline for the heavy door at the foot of the tower. Spud put a cauliflower ear against the door.

"Nothing," he whispered then retracted a silver wire from the edging of his collar and began twiddling it in the lock.

"Erm," coughed Mango. "Did you try the handle first?"

There was a distinct click of the mechanism turning. Spud looked sheepish as he tested the door and found he'd locked it.

"Has he cocked up again?" Wilson asked smugly.

"Yeah, but at least his hand didn't get blown off this time," Mango replied, leaning on his sword.

A minute later Spud was able to reverse the lock and swung the door wide to the drone of more description...

*"...saliva dribbles like green syrup from the corner of the huge drooling beast's mouth. The creature sways rhythmically from foot to foot, a huge rust-edged axe swinging easily between gauntleted fists. Piggy bloodshot eyes squint without emotion at the crowd of adventurers ogling through the wide open door. A slow grin breaks across its face as it lurches forward..."*

Startled, Spud sprang away with surprising agility for one so deformed. As he debunked he called over his shoulder, "Er..., Mango, its for you!"

## IV: How Clean Is My Paladin?

*The drooling ogre stared down at the silvered warrior which had appeared at its door. It paused, hoisted the cruel-bladed axe onto one hugely powerful shoulder and prepared for the inevitable onslaught of small and squashy adventurers all fighting to see who should be first in line to die.*

"Er, excuse me...", Virgil, Holy Knight Paladin, wielder of the Sword of Righteousness, wearer of the Golden Badge of Goodliness, five times winner of the 'Bravest Most Friendly, Truthful and Honest Paladin in Shannafriadom' award, puffed up his mighty chest and stormed politely to the front of the party, Mango performed a similar move, but in reverse.

"If I may be so bold...", Virgil continued, "...as the group as a collective have decided against the normal protocol of

organising a conference of war, you know, some sort of round table discussion from which could have been formalised a clearly defined pro-active agreement as to the rules of engagement and the...,"

The ogre shuffled impatiently; brutish, yellow eyes narrowing, confused. Nothing was happening. Just a wall of tinny noise echoing out of the canned adventurer's head-piece. The ogre wondered idly if this was some kind of new spell.

"...and as our duly elected leader appears to have momentarily found himself somewhere near the rear of the party....," Virgil looked around wondering where Mango had gotten to, "...it has fallen upon me, as the warrior with the next most impressive armour, to open up the preliminary negotiations pending the dispatch of your good self."

The ogre rubbed its sloped forehead even more confused. He much preferred it when they didn't talk. Still, maybe he was wrong about this group; they seemed friendly enough.

"Negotiations? Negotiate your sword up his jaxie, you shiny idiot!" Spud exploded, indignation bursting from every greasy pore. "This is supposed to be a terror filled adventure, not some bloody silly board game!"

"Is this some new plan no one informed me about?" asked Wilson, resident mage.

"You charge in, butcher the bastard, pause to loot the corpse, then push on to the next treasure filled bit!" said Spud.

"And eat the food, Spud," said Zeek, the pudgy priest, "you forgot about the food."

The paladin looked crestfallen. "Well I really think....,"

"Obviously!" retorted Wilson. "Will you just get on with it! Do what we normally do in these situations. Don't waste time thinking, just kill it!"

"Fair enough then," Virgil slammed down his visor with a renewed sense of purpose and stepped through the doorway.

The ogre scratched the back of its lumpy head. He'd never been faced with so many words before. Normally they simply kicked the door in, screamed a bit, then started hitting him. Then he'd hit back, kill 'em, eat the tasty bits and sit down with a bone to suck on, waiting for the next batch of adventurers to turn up. This lot, however, were different, sort of friendly. All right, he'd play along with their silly game.

The ogre gave what he surmised was a welcoming smile, only his ferocious teeth and tusks got in the way. Virgil did what any self-respecting paladin would do in the face of such blatant aggression. He hit the ogre in the face with his sword.

Hearing the sound of distant combat, Mango re-appeared and tried desperately to peep over Spud's shoulder into the room. "Kill what? Is there something in there?"

"Dunno really," said Shana. "Ogre I think."

"Oh?" said a relieved Mango, drawing himself up to his full height. "In that case, I'd better go in and deal with it. For a moment there I thought it might be a demon or something."

Mango charged forward toward the open doorway, but was promptly sent sprawling to the ground as he bounced off the chubby body of Abel Zeek who had stepped into his way.

"What the...?"

Zeek looked up from where he'd been scrupulously examining the door jamb.

"Thought there might be a secret door lever," he explained jauntily, then returned to his close scrutiny of the door frame.

"A secret what?" Mango asked. "The bloody door is wide open? What do we need another entrance for?"

"You can never be too careful about these things," Zeek smiled politely. "I'll just move down here and check this bit then, shall I?"

Mango groaned and stayed down a while longer. He didn't know which was bigger, Zeek's stupidity or the cleric's belly.

Meanwhile, inside the tower, the ogre howled in pain as Virgil's bright blade split his smile even wider. Ogre blood sprayed across the paladin, then ran away to the ground in great droplets like water off a duck's back. Virgil struck again, but this time the ogre managed to dodge the blow whilst slamming his broad-bladed axe heavily against the paladin's breastplate. Virgil staggered back, breathing heavy.

"Think we should help him?" asked Shana.

"He didn't ask," observed Wilson, picking some lint from his rune-chased robe. "Anyway, seems to be coping all right."

The ogre swung again, a mighty whooshing swing of the axe, and again found his mark with a thunderous impact that would have cleaved a one-stab opponent in twain. But it merely made Virgil stagger backwards, toppling a table and overturning a bucket of slops. A faint bruising appeared on the paladin's forehead and the foul smelling refuse dribbled off his armour in neat rivulets. Virgil stabbed back expertly; more ogre blood sprayed over and off the paladin.

"How's he do that?" asked Spud.

"What?" inquired Wilson.

Virgil and the ogre grappled across the room. Their weapons locked together, they smashed to the floor.

"Make all the blood run off him like that?" continued Spud.

The ogre flung Virgil across the room and up against a wall. A shelf shattered and its contents fell over the paladin. He paused, a slight dribble of blood oozing from his mouth, breathing heavy, but otherwise unharmed by the repeated onslaught of the ogre. Not being a one-stab creature makes a difference! Even so, this was getting beyond a joke. Virgil chanced a glance through the doorway, but no immediate help seemed to be forthcoming, only a thick wad of pig droppings picked up in the courtyard and thrown at him by Wilson. It hit the paladin square in the chest and slid to the ground.

"See! Did you see that? It never even left a mark on him!"

The ogre roared like a mad bull, charging the weary paladin with axe raised high. Virgil fell to his knees and pulled his sword up to fend off the attack, plunging the bright blade up to his elbows into the ogre's exposed abdomen. The ogre stopped dead in its tracks, its confused smile frozen forever.

"Its like I told you," Wilson explained. "Shit never sticks to a paladin."

Mango strode into the room, his armour buckled and sword drawn. "Right then, lads, lets get this fight over with!"

Zeek peeped around the corner. "Any secret doors in there?"

Shana stood in the doorway, a look of disgust playing across her face. "This pad needs a women's touch."

"Yeah, me too," leered Spud, his grotesque head appearing between her legs.

"Any treasure?" asked Wilson.

Virgil slid to the ground exhausted. "Medic!"



## V: Once Trapped, Thrice Furious

*The A-Team had entered the orc's den via the tower, and having cleared a few rooms of their minor inconveniences, building their score of adventure points and gathering some incidental treasure along the way, now they were deep underground. This was the life, thump-and-run adventuring at its very best. But where were the orcs? It all seemed far too quiet for everyone's liking. The group nervously surveyed the next room. You never could be too sure, it looked safe enough, your average looking library, but...*

"What'd orcs want with a library?" queried Shana.

"Dungeon filler," announced Wilson with authority.

"Yeah, looks al' right - plush. Safe," Spud sauntered into the room, parking himself in a comfy chair. They all followed, Shana preening herself in the mirror above the fireplace.

"I'll check for secret doors, then," Zeek offered. He began diligently searching the bookcases that lined the walls, plucking heavy volumes, twisting ornaments and generally rearranging everything in a desperate attempt to prove how useful he really could be, at a pinch.

"Wonder what knowledge these books contain?" Wilson thumbed through the musty books.

"Er, fellows, there *is* a maiden in distress awaiting our rescue," Virgil reminded them, chaffing to get on with it.

"Maybe there's a secret door behind this cabinet..." mumbled Zeek to himself.

"There is a perfectly good door here," suggested Virgil, pointing to the obvious exit in the far wall of the room.

"Aha, found it!" Zeek spun around, beaming proudly at his discovery of a secret passage revealed behind a trophy cabinet that swung away from the wall.

Spud leapt from his chair and peaked within. "A secret passage!" he announced.

The rest of the party crowded around the halfling, patting him on the back. "You've done it again, Spud," Mango praised the thief.

"I found it!" Zeek chided.

"Don't know what we'd do without you, Spud," said Wilson. "Is it trapped?"

Zeek's fat chin wobbled, his lips quivered, tears gathered in his hurt eyes. "I'll check for another one, then, shall I?"

"Shush, blobbo, Spud's looking for traps!" hissed Shana.

Zeek, disconsolate, wandered off to the other side of the library as the others waited with hushed voices for Spud to finish his expert search of the opened doorway.

"Safe as houses!" Spud announced, his ugly mug grinning up at the others as he stepped backwards into the passage and then promptly disappeared through the floor. A short scream ended with a loud splash.

"Good call," said Wilson dryly. Wilson, Virgil, Shana and Mango peered over into the pit.

"Folding floor, deep hole, your standard pit trap," Mango announced with the voice of experience.

From below came a heartfelt wail of agony. "Acid, I've dropped into a vat of bloody acid!"

"Nasty variation, that," Mango observed.

"It'll sting a bit," said Wilson.

"Might improve his looks, though," sniggered Shana.

"Should we not throw him a rope?" suggested Virgil.

"Bugger it! I'll climb out meself," Spud's voice came up from below. The burning thief began to climb the pit wall.

On the opposite side of the room, Zeek was dancing a little excited jig. He had found something again; a lever beside the fireplace. He turned to call to his comrades, but then remembering how they'd been so rude to him, Zeek thought better of it and decided to pull the lever all by himself. "This time, I'll take the glory," he mumbled.

Spud was nearly to the lip of the pit, his pain-wracked body dripping acid that hissed and sizzled as it burned through clothes, armour and flesh.

"Nearly there!" Virgil encouraged the little half-man.

Suddenly there was a loud twang, the sound of old springs that had long laid dormant protesting as they came to life. The floor section of the pit trap closed, knocking Spud back down into the hole screaming.

"Shit," said Wilson, "the trap is resetting!" The muffled sound of Spud splashing into the vat of acid again, was followed by the halfling's forlorn screams.

Across the room, Zeek puzzled over the depressed lever. "Strange," he cogitated, "doesn't seem to do anything."

Back at the secret passage, Mango scratched his head. "Wonder what made the trap re-arm?"

As one the group turned to look at Zeek. The cleric stood across the room with a lever in his hand. As one, the group all cried out "Noooo!" as Zeek pushed the lever back up again.

In the pit Spud had almost climbed back to the top as the floor to the passage, his roof, swung open yet again, thumping him on the head and sending him crashing backwards... "Aaaargh!"

"Bloody hellfire, Zeek," raged Mango, "are you doing this on purpose?"

Zeek shrugged his plump shoulders with a sheepish half-smile. "I am only trying to help!"

A very badly burnt Spud emerged from the pit looking bloody murder at Abel Zeek, poisoned dagger in hand.

## VI: A Demon in Name Only?

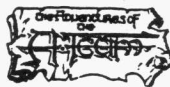
*After the library, the Merry Band entered the secret passage into a labyrinth. Dangers had been met and faced, puzzles found and ignored and now the group grow ever more edgy. Six whole episodes and still no rescue...or treasure! Finally, they saw their chance. They had passed through a series of short dark tunnels at the end of which stood a pair of gilt bound doors.*

"Quest's end!" thought Virgil.

"Finally some bloody goodies," thought his fellows.

The group eagerly passed through the doors which mysteriously opened as they approached, and edged into the room. Suddenly all hell broke loose. In the centre of the cavernous room, a demonic figure, with a flaring trunk and enormous flappy ears drew itself up. Smoke wreathed around it's huge and fearsome form.





"Bloody Hell! A demon!" Mango went white. "Erm... I think I've just been hit with a fear spell. Sorry guys, I'm off." Mango ducked back out into the corridor and scarpered.

Wilson peered up at the beast with open curiosity. "It can't be a demon, we're not high enough level!" he declared.

"Course it is," answered Virgil. "It has all the classical demonic aspects - claws, fangs, smoke, beady red eyes."

"But look at its nose," said Wilson. The band stared at the foul looking beast. "Looks bloody ridiculous."

Suddenly the thing with the long trunk-like nose spoke, its voice booming like a thing that booms really impressively.

"I AM CARAXUS." Steaming ichor dripped from slaving jaws. "I AM THE ...,"

"There" said Spud conclusively, "Virgil's right. Its got a demon name. There's an 'X' in it."

"GUARDIAN OF THE DOOR...,"

"Its not a demon, I tell you, its got a bloody trunk!" Once he'd made his stand, Wilson was not to be moved.

"NONE MAY PASS WITHOUT...,"

"Well then, smart-arse. What is it?" Shana smiled scornfully at Wilson.

"...THE KEY OF...,"

"Well, it is obvious. One of them Tolkeiny things," Wilson thumbed through his 'What Beast Is That?'. "There, page 154. It is an Oliphant!"

"...A WHAT?" said the demon looking a little perplexed. It was used to being taken much more seriously than this.

"LISTEN TO ME CLOSELY. BEWARE LITTLE THINGS, I AM ...,"

"Dangerous?" asked Shana, looking over Wilson's shoulder.

Caraxus began to feel a little left out. "DANGEROUS? DANGEROUS? I AM CARAXUS! I WILL SLAY...,"

"Sure pal!" Wilson turned to Shana. "Here look," he shoved the book in the ranger's face. "Completely harmless."

"...STAND IN AWE WORMS! I AM THE MIGHTY CARAXUS AND NONE SHALL PASS ME!" Caraxus was becoming mightily confused, its grip on reality slipping.

"Bye" said Spud, swathed in bandages, strolling past the demon, blissfully unconcerned. The others also began to file by, squeezing to get past Caraxus's great bulk.

"...NO! STOP! OR I WILL...,"

"There, there nice nelliphant." Zeek offered the confused demon a handful of peanuts.

"...HOW DARE YOU! TREMBLE BEFORE THE MIGHT OF ...,"

But it was no good trying to intimidate the A-Team, they were simply too stupid to scare easily, especially when faced with a be-trunked demon; it appealed to their sense of the ridiculous.

"Bye!" said Wilson brightly, snapping his book closed.

"Nice wasn't he?" said Zeek.

"Yeah, chatty for a change," agreed Shana.

"The girl must be close," mused Virgil.

"That reminds me," said Spud, "Where is Mango?"

Caraxus sat down, deflated. With groups like that, perhaps it was time to retire from the demon business.

## VII: Its A Dirty Job...

*The A-Team had faced danger many times before. Blood-curdling terrors that would chill the most redoubtable of adventurers to their very marrow had been mere side issues to this merry band that knew absolutely nothing of the word fear. But now they faced their greatest test, Mango the Magnificent, mightiest warrior of a mighty clan had gone missing, presumed dead. The band, leaderless and alone, faced their darkest hour.*

"Well, should we go back and look for him?" Shana sighed.

"Who?" asked Wilson abstractedly.

"You know, old Whatsizface. Mango the Fruiterer."

"Why?"

"Weeelll, he is our nominated leader."

"Just pick another one then and we'll be off," said Wilson.

Spud nodded thoughtfully, "I guess it is one sixth more treasure to be divvied up."

"How can you be so callous?" blurted Virgil. "He was more than our leader, he was a friend, a companion, a...,"

"Cream bun, anyone?" Zeek butted in helpfully.

"Zeek, stand watch!" snapped Shana. "Virgil's right for once. We can't simply desert him after all he's done for us."

The group brooded in silence.

"Err, as a thought though," Shana broke the silence, "just who were you suggesting would be leader? Solely as a matter of interest of course." She straightened her shoulders and smiled pleasingly at everyone.

"Obvious!" answered Virgil. "Me of course!"

"What?" sneered Shana, "You! You? Why?"

Virgil looked puzzled. "I'd have thought it more than a little obvious. I'm the fighter with the next shiniest set of plate mail!"

"Sexist bollocks!" Shana exploded.

"Precisely!" agreed Wilson. "What sort of a system's that? How about for a change we go with something a little less obvious, like highest intelligence for example?"

Zeek wiped the remains of an extra large cream bun from his face and put on his best spiritual look. "Morally I feel we're missing the point a bit," he said, being more than a little put out by the guffaws that greeted this comment.

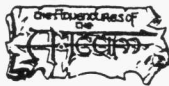
"Sure pal," Wilson smiled smugly, "good point, now how about contributing something more useful to this discussion, like go on watch?" Zeek wandered off, cowed.

"And another thing," snapped Shana returning to the fray, "a female leader is long overdue..."

*Meanwhile, in another part of the dungeon...*

Mango sauntered nonchalantly along the dank corridors muttering quietly to himself about the indignity of being deserted by his group after boldly securing both flanks and the party's rear from any possibility of counterattack. Suddenly he stopped, throwing himself against the dungeon wall. Ahead of him, a small dark figure, head bent down, walked slowly towards him, long arms swinging rhythmically in front.

"Damn it!" Mango cursed. "Trapped!. Demons behind, mysterious undescribed beasts ahead, and me totally alone!"



Slowly, unbidden, a thought crept into his head. Mango closed his visor, shut his eyes and pretended he wasn't there.

That didn't seem to work; the menacing figure drew closer. "Damn," thought Mango, "Oh well, nothing else for it, lesser of two terrible tortured deaths. Chin up!"

Mango leapt into the centre of the corridor belching his mighty war cry and swung his sword blade into the face of the oncoming unidentified Beast of Terror. The janitor collapsed as Mango's sword crashed through his front row of teeth.

"Ugh!" he said attempting to collapse to the floor.

"Whoops!" Mango attempted to be a little more friendly by preventing his victim's fall with a gauntleted grab to the throat. "Thought you were the enemy."

"Nenemy, bruddy nenemy! Do I look like the bruddy nenemy?" said the janitor through broken teeth and blood.

Mango shrugged. "It is a little dark," he said apologetically. The little man shook himself to his feet. "Where's me bruddy broom gone?" he fumed. Mango cheerily retrieved it for him.

"Who are you anyway?" Mango asked.

"Just bruddy towld yer didn't I? The bruddy janitor! Doug and Dave's Dungeon Cleaning Services. 'No job too dirty!' that's our motto."

"Well what are you doing here in the middle of an action packed adventure of murderous proportions?"

"Well who the bruddy hell do you think cleans up after you buggers have been through smashing and breaking and dirtying? Anyway, Team Wolf was only just through here two days ago, and quite successfully too, I might add."

Mango looked unimpressed.

"There's not supposed to be anyone in here for another week or so," Doug continued, "so just what the bruddy hell are you doing here?"

Mango opened his visor and scratched his chin, confused.

*Meanwhile back to the Team...*

"...all right for Vermiculite's sake, we have democratically decided that our new leader is Virgil because it is God's wish, and otherwise he'll sulk and we won't have any fighters at all!" said Wilson. "Agreed?"

The group nodded.

"Right then, let's get on with this adventure."

Virgil was just in the process of saying that at this momentous juncture a short prayer was probably called for when the doors burst open, issuing forth a rabid screaming horde of blood-thirsty orcs.

"Bloody hell!" yelled Wilson. "Where did they come from?"

"Who's supposed to be on watch?" squealed Spud.

The team turned accusingly towards Zeek. Zeek smiled sheepishly. "Er, cream bun, anyone?"

*And on the other side of the labyrinth...*

"...and so there you have it, our story in a nutshell. We have come to retrieve the girl!" finished Mango whilst helping the janitor to pick up his missing teeth.

"Giwl?"

"Yes the girl. Whatsername. You know, so and so's daughter..."

Doug looked even more puzzled.

"...him in the village."

"Oh, her, I'd forgotten about her. Well off the right track aren't you!"

"What?" asked Mango.

"Turned left at the bottom of stairs 15b didn't you," the janitor said rather too smugly.

"Well yes, possibly," Mango answered dubiously.

"Should have gone right, through secret door 181 and up the tower."

"Look, what are you gibbering about?"

"Only this little lad," Doug tittered, "you've gone the wrong way. Taken the wrong turn you might say. This is Darking's Deep Dungeon of Demonic Death!"

"No, No, NO!" Mango had a nasty creeping feeling crawling up his back. "We're Tokey's Tower of Terrible Tribulations! Levels four to six."

"Ha Ha Ha," the janitor was fair dribbling now. "Ho Ho Ho, 'levels four to six', Ho Ho Ho!"

"Someone's buggered up badly," Mango looked despairingly towards the ceiling. No sign of deliverance came.

"Anyway, the one your looking for, I think she's a sacrifice, so that'll be down in the Pentangle Room. She'll, be a little busy now. Sacrifice began ten minutes ago."

Mango strapped on his massive shield, tightened his armour buckles and put on his huge pair of Mighty Mitts of Mauling. "Ere you wouldn't happen to have seen the rest of the party would you?"

Doug pointed down a long corridor.

"Right then," growled Mango impressively, "time to finish this! And all alone too!"

## VIII: A Geometry Lesson

*The bottles of pop were drained. The last of the nibblies scoffed. A wry smirk settled on the murderous visage of the Lord of the Polygons. The A-team trapped! Surrounded! And worse still, their heroic leader missing. A doomed look descended on the Merry Band. It seemed that the end was nigh...*

*...besides which, it was nearly pack up time.*

"Looks bad," Wilson surveyed the sea of pig-snouted faces.

"Sure does," agreed Zeek licking his lips. "That's the last of the creams. Down to plain bikkies now."

Wilson turned to Virgil. "Well, duly elected leader, what's your plan?"

Virgil had a rather painful look upon his face as he thought hard. "Hmm, now what would Mango do in this situation?"

"What he already has," said Spud, "bolt for the nearest door!"

"Not a bad plan that," Virgil scanned the room for obvious signs of exit. "Too many orcs in the way. Only one thing left to do then. We'll have to kill them all."

"What?" spluttered Wilson, "there's millions of them! How we gonna kill all of 'em."

Virgil smiled grimly, drawing his blade with a flourish. "Methodically, but without malice, for that is our way!"

*Whilst elsewhere...*

"Damn it then!" Mango lumbered off down the hallway. "If that's the way they feel, I'll just bugger off by myself." The first junction loomed.



"RIGHT!" he announced, deliberately flouting A-Team convention which maintained the next encounter was always around the next left hand turn.

"RIGHT!" he announced again at the next intersection, ignoring the plaintive cries of a girl in obvious need of rescue down the left hand corridor.

"RIGHT!" he announced at the next crossroads, denying the existence of a large neon sign pointing left that read 'A-Team Sacrifice & Rescue this way'.

Suddenly, a chill damp descended over Mango. He scowled. "Drat! Some gods have no sense of humour...", was all he could get out before a blinding light enveloped him and a gargantuan thumb and forefinger snatched him up.

*But with the rest of the A-Team...*

As Virgil and Shana went about their work, the heap orcish dead and wounded was increasing logarithmically.

"Yo!" burred Virgil happily as another orc head bounced across the floor. "Brill! Low-life, two hits per round! Don't you just love first-level greeblies."

Shana's blade flickered, first one, then a second orc fell cleanly sliced. "Yup, all seems a bit too easy really...", with a nervous glance upwards.

Ineffectual blows rained upon them as the orcs frantically tried to come to terms with the fact that their attacks simply bounced off the pair. "Joys of low armour class," Virgil beamed, then promptly dispatched a round dozen foes.

"Healing anyone?" Zeek strolled up waving his feather. "Blessings, resurrections, bible stories with happy endings?"

"You must be joking," retorted Virgil indignantly. "They've hardly enough levels amongst them to scratch my armour class let alone injure me!"

"Just trying to help," Zeek snorted and wandered off to the rear where the non-fighter element was enjoying a bite to eat.

The roar of battle began to diminish. The orcs were falling back through the door in disarray. "Flip!" cursed Virgil, then turned bright red at his lack of self control. "Over so soon?"

"Something nasty's coming," observed Shana. "It always goes quiet when we're winning. Give's Him time to think," Shana glanced up again.

Virgil put his boot to the door, and it slumped open. Beyond, a new larger breed of orc was forming up into a neat shield wall formation with pikes spiking out in front of it.

"Gee," said Virgil, "that's a bit clever. I've a plan, though. I'll commence a frontal assault whilst the missile troops provide covering fire."

"The who?" asked Spud, doing a double take.

"You and Shana. With bows."

Spud nodded understanding. Shana and Spud readied their bows as Virgil marched merrily toward the pikes.

"What's going on up front?" asked Wilson getting a bit bored at the rear of the adventure. He sauntered up to have a look at what was going on at the pointy end of the adventure.

Zeek shrugged. "Dunno. Virgil wants us to provide some fire, I think."

"Fire?" Wilson perked up. "Really? I wouldn't have thought it appropriate in this confined space. Are you sure, Zeek?"

"I'll check. Wouldn't want to make any mistakes now would we?" Zeek bustled forward.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked the embattled paladin.

"Fire!" yelled Virgil. "Fire over their heads."

Zeek returned to the rear and announced to Wilson, "The chief says fire when ready, right over their heads."

"He's the boss," Wilson shrugged and began to rhythmically weave his hands together, muttering to himself. Before long the acrid odour of ozone filled the room as a pale blue light formed around his hands. Wilson giggled in manic glee as the pale light coalesced into a crackling ball and rose majestically into the centre of the chamber. The room silenced as all eyes, adventurers and orcs alike, were involuntarily drawn to the menacing beauty hovering in the air.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Virgil pausing in mid-decapitation.

"Couldn't be." Shana's voice seemed to rise a little. "No one in their right mind would release one of those in here."

All turned automatically to look at Wilson who waved and grinned sheepishly from behind the half-closed door.

"What volume do those things fill again?" Shana's voice was now taking on a slightly hysterical tone.

"About 30 000 cubic feet," said Spud shuddering.

"33 actually," called Wilson helpfully.

"And the area in this room is?" Shana now showing signs of extreme stress.

Zeek began to mutter some complex equations. "Length times breadth..., the square on the hypotenuse..., about 20,000 cubic feet," the cleric announced.

"Thought so," Virgil said. "Bit of a problem then, eh?"

*Elsewhere, but getting closer...*

"All right, all right!" Mango said irritably. "I'm, going!"

"...you know I like you to stay together. You know I won't run two groups at once...,"

"There!" Mango called loudly. "I'm here! Right where I'm supposed to be." He went to pull open the door then paused.

"Been in too many dungeons to fall for that old one," he said smugly. He placed his ear to the door. Silence.

"Odd," he mused. "I thought He said the Team are on the other side of this door."

Mango tested the door. Unlocked. Fumbling a finger into the lock he looked for traps. Finding none he opened the door.

Mango did not have time to wonder why the entire population of the room were stood with their necks craning to the ceiling. BOOM! The room erupted before his startled eyes into a cauldron of scorching flame. There followed the softly echoing rattle of the Polygons of Fate.

## IX: The 'Paff' Incident

*The firestorm died, and so too had at least one member of the mighty A-Team. But with all the orcs destroyed and Mango returned, quest's end was in sight...*

"Well," said Wilson calmly stroking his beard. "That sorted them out!"

The remaining members of the party, all showing signs of fiery immolation, turned in mutual disbelief. All that is, except for Shana who leapt at the mage's neck screaming. "Look what you've done to my lovely golden hair, you bastard!" Her tresses lay scorched and shrivelled on the floor.

"What," gurgled Wilson. "Bald's in isn't it? Looks nice!"



Virgil stared vacantly at the ceiling, making odd sounds, "Whooooooshhh." His head looking like a currant encased in the still unstained, unmarked shining plate mail.

"Well, he did say 'Fire'!" gagged Wilson defensively.

"Fire bows," snarled Shana, "fire arrows, fire anything but not bloody fire FIRE." With each "fire" her voice raised in pitch and she punctuated her points by rattling Wilson's neck and banging his head against the still smoking wall.

"Oh," said Wilson sheepishly, "everyone is entitled to one little mistake, aren't they?"

"Mistake! Look what you've done to my hair..."

A groan came from Virgil in the corner. "...and the rest of the group," she added, putting Wilson down.

The dishevelled mage re-arranged himself and surveyed the carnage. "Must admit, though, I sorted the orc problem out."

"I'll sort you out..." Shana yelled but was interrupted by the appearance of what looked like the stump of a charred leg waving in front of her face.

"Think this belongs to him?" asked Zeek dolefully.

Shana stared stunned. "What? Who?" asked Wilson.

"Do you think this is a bit of him? Looks familiar don't you think?" Zeek repeated.

All three examined the hairless stump. "What are you talking about, you blithering fool?" Shana had lost her grip.

"Spud," continued Zeek.

"Where is he?" Shana asked, not daring to contemplate the import of the shortness of the offending limb.

"Yeah," answered Zeek. "Funny really, isn't it, that Spud should go like that... roasted."

A loud cry from the shattered exit door announced the return of Mango the Magnificent to the group, smoke rising from blistered armour. "Gimme healing!" Mango sounded upset.

"Certainly, my prodigal son," beamed Zeek. "But first reaffirm your faith in the bountiful Shannafria."

Mango staggered to his feet, the burnt bindings on his armour giving way, the metal plates falling off with a loud clatter. Mango looked very unhappy.

"Now," began Zeek, happily waving his dove's feather holy symbol. "Repeat after me... Shannafria is the Nicest, Shanna...AAAARGGH!"

Mango seized the initiative and Zeek's unmentionables. Mango suddenly felt and looked a lot happier. Zeek's feather began to work a little more frantically. "Fine," he squeaked. "Obviously a true believer. There you are, all healed."

Mango sighed blissfully as the healing magic took effect, then scowled as it halted, far short of his full capacity.

"That all?" he growled. "I'm only half full."

Zeek shrugged and smiled. "Sorry, that's all for today. Only so many hours a man can pray, you know. Ask Virgil."

From the corner came the sounds of someone definitely enjoying himself. Virgil had his face to the wall, away from the group, head tipped back, his hands busy in front of him, cooing to himself. The rest of the group looked away in disgust. "The joys of Lawful Goodness," griped Shana.

"Virgil laying hands on himself again," said Wilson.

"He could at least share it around," said Mango.

"No thanks!" said Shana as Virgil turned around, smiling.

A thunderous voice arose from above, the Keeper...

*...your healing session is cut short as more orcs pour into the room, led by a really big orc. Not just any orc. An impressive orc. An orc with bulging muscles, gaudy robes, skulls and nasty paraphernalia dangling from ropes of twined human hair. An orc with attitude...*

"Oh, shit, that's all we need," moaned Wilson, "an orc with description."

"Who's running this fiasco?" whined Mango. "How come the major encounter turns up when I've got no armour on?"

The impressive orc thrust forward the maiden captive, Rowena. "Ere, ya can 'ave 'er!" he growled.

Confused silence. Wilson coughed nervously. "Pardon?"

"Take 'er, I said. Fireballs in a room dis size. You're loonies. Look at the mess," said the impressive orc.

"Must be some sort of trap," muttered Mango. "Too easy."

"This is wrong," announced Virgil. "You take her back, get in that sacrifice room, we'll give you a couple of minutes to set up. Then we'll rush in and rescue the maid properly."

"Wot?" asked the orc.

"What," squeaked Rowena.

"What," asked Shana and Wilson in complete disbelief.

"Yeah," confirmed Mango, pulling his Mighty Mitts of Mauling back on. "Sounds good to me."

"Gives us time for a quick bite to eat," agreed Zeek.

"Yer all mad," pronounced the orc as he turned to leave.

At this point, the poor confused girl, decided to take her safety into her own hands and ran for the nearest exit.

"After them, Team," yelled Virgil, charging after the retreating orcs.

"Grab her," yelled Wilson, "or we'll be here all night."

Mango stretched out what was meant to be a gentle hand to guide Rowena to safety, but the augmented power of the Mighty Mitts overstated the gesture somewhat.

**PAFF!**

Crack! The sound of the fair maid's neck snapping brought the entire room to silence.

"Whoops," said Mango, biting his lip. "Forgot about the +5 on these gloves."

"Whoops?" said Shana staring in disbelief. "Whoops! Is that all you've got to say for yourself?"

"Accidents, you know, err, happen. What were the conditions on that reward, anyway...?" asked Mango.

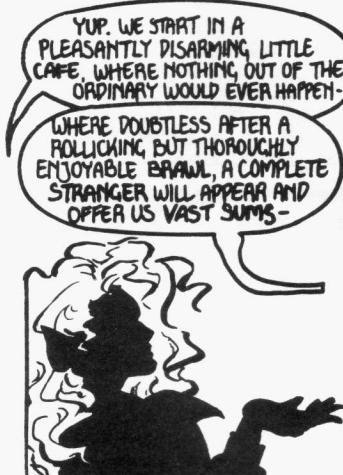
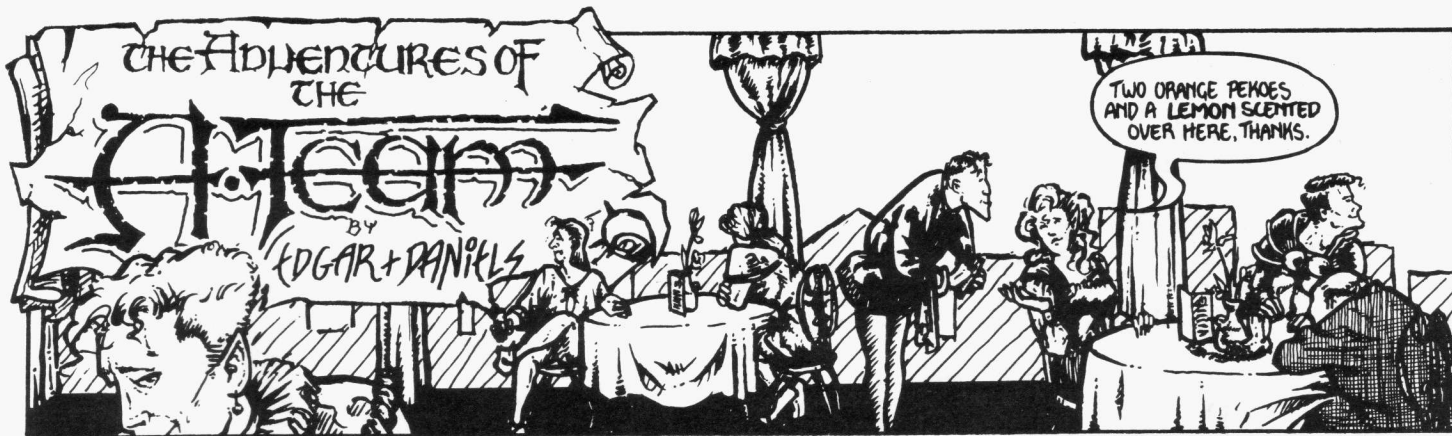
Wilson turned to the ceiling. His hands formed into the mystical 'T' symbol pleading for a time-out. "Been a bit of an accident down here. Do you think we could run through this bit again, please?"

*The entire dungeon trembled, and the air froze as a bespectacled visage glowered down at the party. Then an enormous block of roof plaster fell from the ceiling smothering the A-Team's plaintive stream of apologies with a deadening finality.*

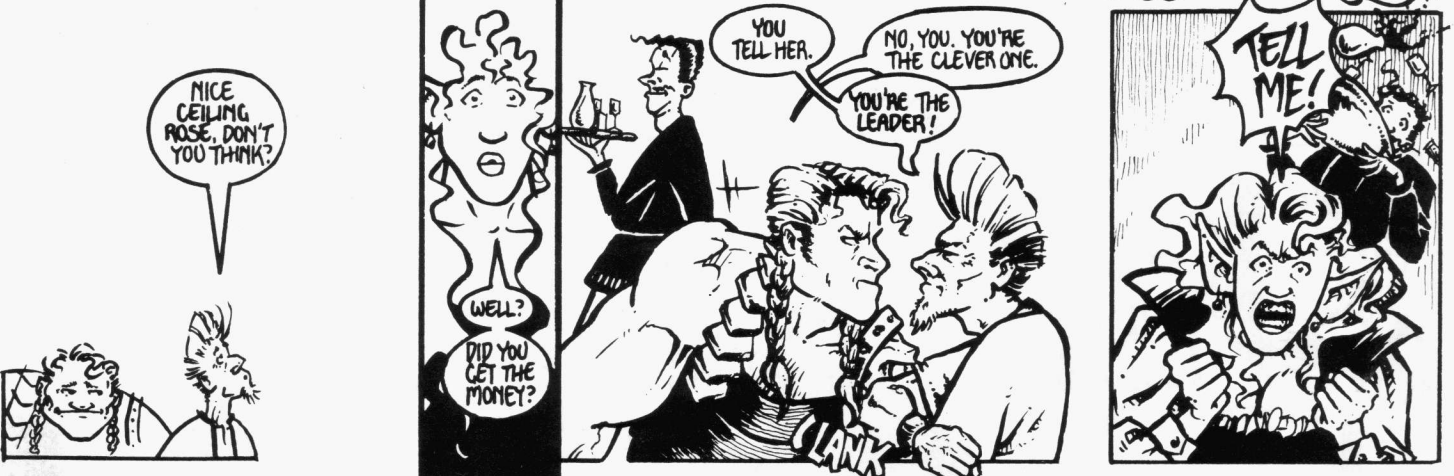
"Who's got the blank character sheets?" came a disembodied voice from abstract darkness.

"Coffee, anyone?"

**THE END**





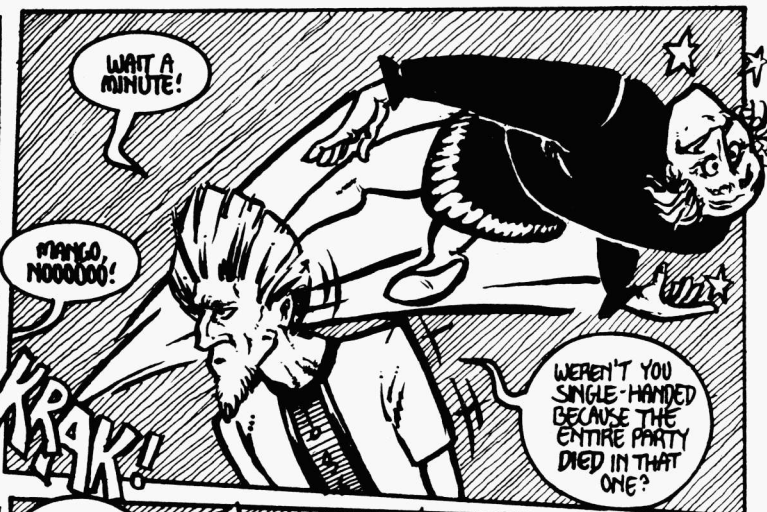
























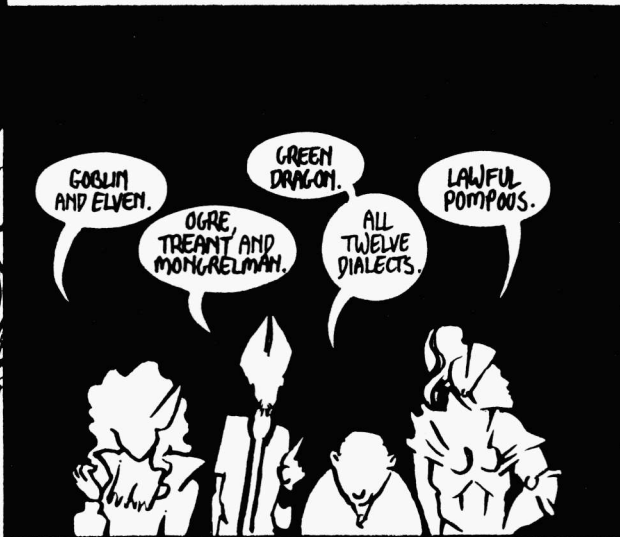




AZZURK NOBIL  
WEELEHAM.



ANYONE  
SPEAK  
ORKISH?



GOSLIN  
AND ELVEN.

GREEN  
DRAGON.

LAWFUL  
POMPOUS.

OGRE,  
TREATY AND  
MONGRELMAN.

ALL  
TWELVE  
DIALECTS.



GOOD. MEANS  
WE CAN'T UNDER-  
STAND A WORD  
THEY SAY. WE'LL  
JUST HAVE TO  
WASTE 'EM.

I HAVE THE  
SOLUTION!

COMPREHEND  
LANGUAGES SPELL.



GREETINGS,  
ORKS.

WE COME  
IN PEACE.



I DON'T  
BELIEVE IT!

SOMETHING  
WE TRIED  
ACTUALLY  
WORKED!!



WE COME TO  
TRADE THIS FOOT  
FOR ANY REMNANT  
OF THE ONE  
CALLED SPUD.

MUST BE  
A TRAP.

NO-ONE IN  
THEIR RIGHT MIND  
WOULD TRADE ONE OF  
THE MULTIVERSE'S  
TEN GREATEST  
ARTIFACTS FOR  
A POTATO!!

THEY HAVE  
IT!!



THEY'RE  
WEAKENING!

JUST AS  
I THOUGHT!



















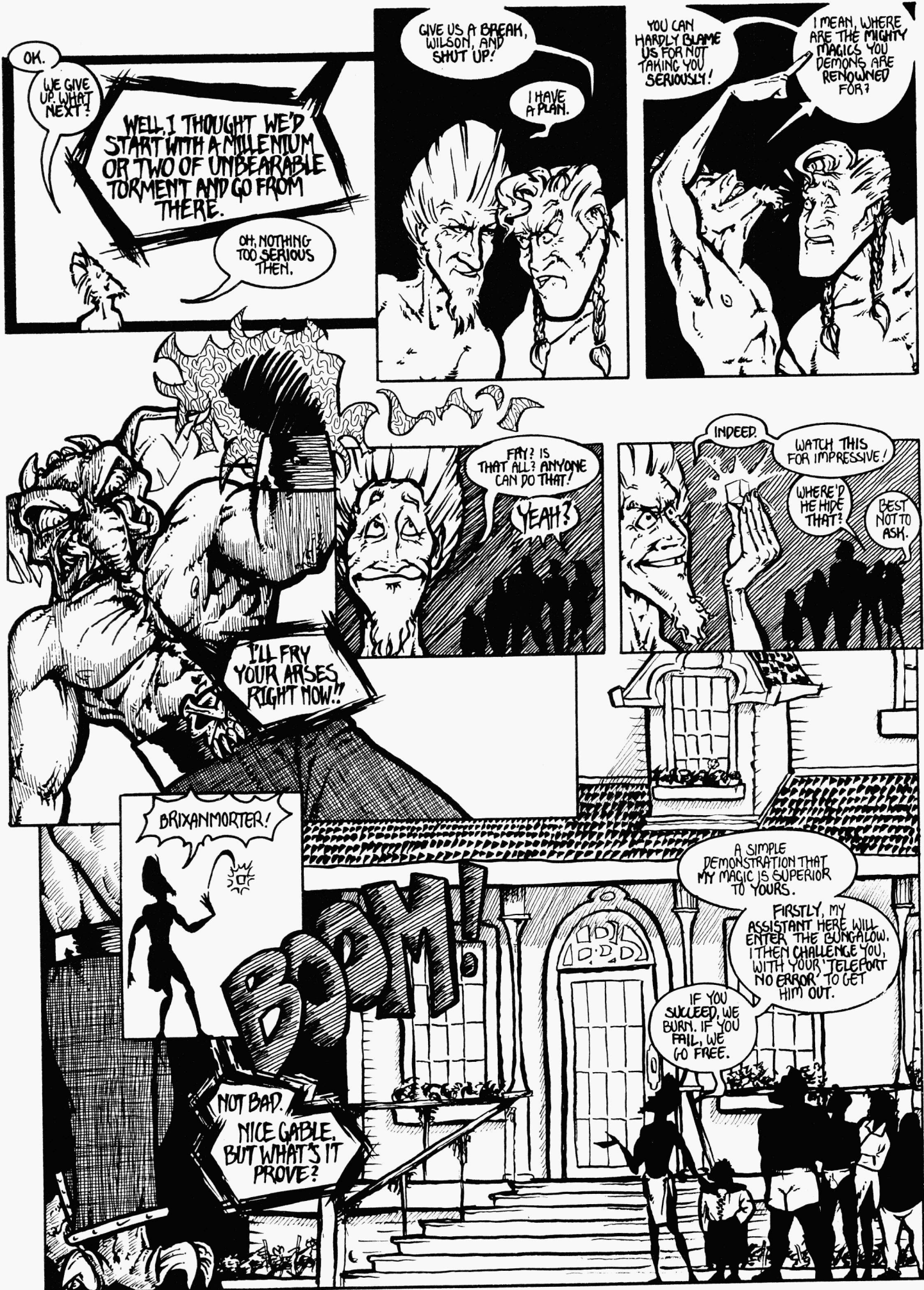




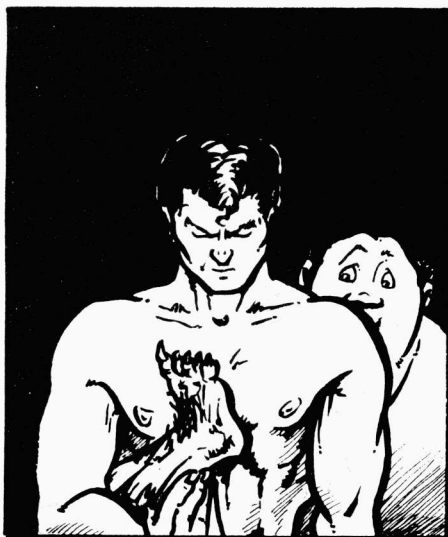
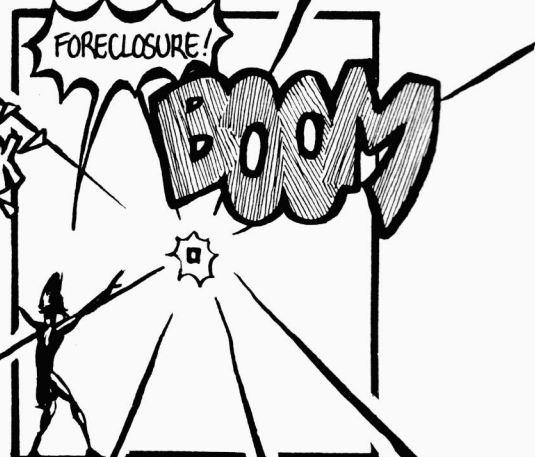












SCOTT EDGAR & ANDREW DANIELS 1994.

# CARAXUS' REVENGE

## I: A Change of Cliche

*Picture a teahouse; genteel atmosphere, chequered table cloths, matching cruet sets and well-mannered guests all being quietly and efficiently attended to by polite waiters each of whom have a small apron at their waist, a silver serving platter balanced on their left hand and a large white napkin draped across their forearm. Sounds lovely doesn't it? A million miles from your dank, rat-infested dungeon, crawling with murderous orcs and blood spattered adventurers.*

*Hmm. What have we here? The table by the window; isn't that Abel Zeek, the chubby cleric? Why is he looking so glum when seated in an eatery? And there is the lovely Shana, her pretty brow furrowed in frown. And lastly, Virgil seated at the table, still in his full plate armour.*

*Wonder what's up?*

"Two Orange Pekoes and a Lemon Scented over here, thanks!" Shana ordered in the drinks from a smiling waiter.

"Nice here isn't it?" Virgil sighed contentedly and looked slowly around the bustling tables. "Different from our usual entrance amidst the murky chaos of some disreputable drinking den." He paused to watch a pair of snappily dressed ogre-magi struggle to keep their little fingers correctly raised as they daintily sipped large cups of Imperial Blend. "Which raises the obvious question; why?"

Shana smiled knowingly as the waiter returned carrying a tray balanced high with fine china and steaming pots of tea.

"Just put them next to the foot," Shana said pointing to a clear spot on the tabletop.

The waiter arched an eyebrow at the charcoaled remnant and retreated quickly into the cafe's depths.

"Oooh," gushed Virgil surveying the tray. "Little chocolate fortune cookies as well. I like them."

"Quite," said Shana, pertly. "In answer to your question, we've been heavily criticised lately for being *derivative*. You know, always starting in a rowdy tavern, where, after a rollicking but thoroughly enjoyable brawl, a complete stranger appears out of the blue and offers us vast sums of cash to complete a perilous adventure."

"So," said Virgil scooping a large dollop of double cream into his cup and taking an exceptionally large cookie, "there's another way?"

Shana nodded and sipped her tea. "Yup. We start in a pleasantly disarming little cafe, where nothing out of the ordinary would ever happen..."

"...where, doubtless after a rollicking but thoroughly enjoyable brawl, a complete stranger will appear out of the blue and offer us vast sums to complete a perilous adventure," ventured Virgil.

"Where," corrected Shana, "we will ease ourselves decorously into the next adventure without all that macho claptrap and begin with a little intelligent role-playing."

"Oh," said Virgil doubtfully. "Great fun."

"Are you sure that's not enough?" asked a rather dejected Zeek suddenly coming out of his reverie. "I distinctly remember getting Shana resurrected from a single strand of hair from her..."

Shana coughed, almost choking on a sip of tea.

"...hairbrush." Zeek finished.

"Yes," lectured Shana. "But that's not the problem." The ranger picked up the burnt foot and thrust it into Zeek's face. "How many toes has that foot got?"

"Three," answered Zeek brightly.

"And how many did Spud have?" Shana went on.

"Three, no six! Maybe four, who knows?"

Shana glared at the squirming lump of lard. "Five, Zeek. You know and I know he had five like everyone else."

"Could have lost a few in the blast," Abel Zeek sulked.

"Possibly, but then how do you explain those?" she asked pointing at the great hooked claws on the toes.

"Personal hygiene was never a high priority for Spud. They just need a little trimming!"

"They're claws, you imbecile! Admit it, you've brought back the wrong foot!" she shouted and swept the offending article into Zeek's lap. Some of the other clients in the cafe sent disapproving looks at the A-Team table.

Shana lowered her voice again, took another sip of tea and said; "Hopefully the boys'll get enough money from our employer to hire a new thief."

Virgil whistled softly and looked very busy with his fortune cookie at the word 'thief'.

"We could go back and get Spud," chirped Zeek. He was using the foot to scratch a point in the small of his back.

Shana frowned, "The A-Team NEVER goes back!"

Virgil looked up from attempting to unravel his cookie. "Yet we do owe it to our little comrade; after all, he was a fully paid up member with all the usual rights of recovery and restoration."

Zeek smiled enthusiastically. "Yeah, and he always brought along those yummy cheesy biscuits."

Shana reluctantly nodded in agreement. "We'll put it to the rest of the Team when they get back..."

Just then the swinging door's to the cafe flew open with a loud clatter, causing the ogre-magi to look up from their plates of spaghetti with distinct disfavour as in sauntered Mango resplendent in his death's-head armour and a very flushed face, followed by Wilson smiling like the cat who has swallowed the cream-soaked mouse.

"Dammit, Shana!" bellowed Mango, somewhat unsettling the cafe's carefully created ambience. "We've looked in every two-bit tavern, bar, gin joint and brothel in this stinking town! What are you doing hiding in this..." Mango looked around groping desperately for lost words. "This hellhole!"

"Cafe," soothed Shana. "And keep your voice down." She looked at the group of frowning waiter's gathering near the entrance to the kitchen.

The newcomers slumped around the table. "What's this?" Mango asked as he grabbed a teapot and proceeded to pour its scalding contents down his unsuspecting throat. "YEOW!" he screamed. "Non-alcoholic!"

"Never mind that, how did you go on?" Shana asked, trying to calm things down before proceedings took their inevitable turn for the worse.

Mango looked at Wilson, who looked at the ceiling. "Nice ceiling rose don't you think?"

"Well," asked Shana, "did you get the money?"

"You tell her," said Wilson, nudging Mango in the ribs.

"No you, you're the clever one," retorted Mango as he emptied the flowers out of the vase on the table and drank the water to cool his burning throat.

"You're the leader!" Wilson demurred whilst scoffing a handful of the fortune cookies.

"TELL ME!" shrieked an infuriated Shana.

The cafe fell silent as every occupant turned to stare at the adventuring group. A waiter glided across and put his finger to his lips and hushed them. Shana whipped back a loose strand of hair behind her elongated elven ear and smiled her best placatory smile. The waiter backed away and people returned to their subdued conversations, shaking their heads at the total lack of moral fibre in the adventurer of today.

"OK," began Wilson. "Well we explained to that merchant fellow about the terribly sad loss of his beloved daughter, who fell by the evil hands of those savage orcs just as we were about to execute a most amazing rescue..."

Virgil coughed and chose to fiddle furiously with the stubborn wrapper of his fortune cookie rather than listen to any more of this sanitised version of true events.

"...and he cried. We cried. He cried some more. We asked for the money. He refused. We begged. He refused again. We hit him. He cried. We hit him again. He coughed up the gold and a few teeth. We thanked him and left."

"Excellent. Enough cash for new gear?" asked Shana.

"Or to get Spud resurrected when we find him?" suggested Abel Zeek looking up from his food.

"As I was saying," Wilson continued. "We set out to find you guys when, um," Wilson paused thoughtfully. "Whilst looking for a shop that sells rope, grapnel, iron spikes etcetera, we somehow found ourselves in Enrik's Extraneous Emporium and..."

Shana turned an unflattering shade of red. "A magic shop! Spit it out, what did you buy?"

"Seeing as you asked," Wilson rummaged amongst the linings of his voluminous robe and triumphantly pulled out a tiny enamelled cube.

"Just what we need, more dice," said Shana scornfully.

"Dice! Dice! This, my dear, is no mere toy. This is Bugby's Banal Bungalow!"

The A-Team leaned over the table to get a closer look, they were collectively unimpressed.

Wilson tried to salvage the situation. "With a single word of command, which is..."

The group leaned forward again, attentively this time.

"...known only to me..." said Wilson putting the item back beneath his robe.

The group leaned back.

"...Bugby's Banal Bungalow will expand, transform and transmogrify into a fully-detached two-by-one, complete with, wait for it, a fully-enclosed horseport!" Wilson waited for the applause and following adulation. The group remained silent.

"Which does what?" asked Shana carefully.

"Just think of it! No more roughing it! Warm baths of an evening. Lounge chairs, beds, toilets!" Wilson beamed.

"Battlements? Towers? Defensible positions?" asked Virgil.

"Well no," admitted the mage, "but it does come complete with child-proof locks to all external windows!"

"And you spent all our money on that?" Shana scowled.

"Hah!" Wilson looked hurt. "Do you think me so selfish!"

The A-Team merely stared back.

"Well I didn't."

Shana looked relieved. "Well at least that's something."

"Mango drank the rest," Wilson finished.

Mango burped apologetically. Shana leapt to her feet. "I don't believe you two! What are we going to do about new gear? Look at the state of my leathers."

"The tattered look is quite becoming on you, Shana. Shows off your 18 charisma to a tee," smirked Wilson.

"Shut up! And what are we going to do without a thief?" Shana was getting really worked up.

"Ah ah!" said Mango. "I've fixed that one. Met a few old mates who offered to rent us one part-time until we get Spud back on his foot..., feet. One's going to be delivered."

"Rent? That does it," huffed an indignant Virgil. "No team to which I belong will operate with a rented, um, mercantile agent. We'll have to go get Spud back."

"Fine by me," said Mango. "But we'll use this one till then, agreed?" The group nodded.

"One thing though," asked Shana, "delivered? What do you mean by..."

Suddenly the cafe's plate glass window exploded as a large sack filled with a frantically wriggling object flew through it.





"...delivered."

Once again, a heavy silence fell over the room, a cook carrying a heavy rolling pin appeared from the kitchen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our latest mercantile agent," Mango swept through an impossible bow in his armour as out of the smelly sack popped an ever smellier, dishevelled looking head. The cafe fell into pandemonium.

The head's hair, which completely covered most of its face was coarse and matted with grime. Through the thief's snub, porcine nose ran a large gold ring which seemed to glint rather evilly. Beady, blood-red eyes locked onto the A-Team.

"Greetings, dudes. Dankwart, at your service!"

"Good grief," Wilson looked dejected. "A half-orc!"

"Nope!" huffed Virgil. "I refuse to adventure with one of them! Its, its undignified." He folded his arms with what he hoped was an air of finality. Behind him a group of agitated waiters were discoursing somewhat loudly with the cook.

"A half-orc! Me, not just any half-orc!" the thief adopted a look of extreme hurt. "Me Dankwart."

The head waiter flitted over waving his arms at Mango, shouting something about broken windows and please leave. Mango slowly expanded out of his seat. "I'll handle this."

Shana's head spun frantically. Things were rapidly getting out of hand. "No, Mango, we're going now."

Mango, however, ignored her, pulling on his Mighty Mitts of Mauling with a grim look in his eye.

Meanwhile, the half-orc spoke. "I am THE Dankwart! It was I who single-handedly scaled the Tower of Zorick, to gain the Fire Gem of the Zills."

"Wait a minute," said Wilson deftly ducking under the projectile body of the cafe's head waiter. "Weren't you single-handed because the entire party died in that one?"

"Mango, NOOO!" shrieked Shana leaping onto Mango's back in a vain attempt to stop him shoving the head of a very unhappy looking waiter into a tea pot.

"And it was I who removed the Eye of the Greater Bilge Beast from under it's very nose!" Dankwart boasted.

"Two paladins and a squad of gnomes died in that one," Abel Zeek observed. Virgil, still struggling with his fortune cookie growled.

"NO! Not another window!" screamed Shana just a little too late to prevent another staff member rather hurriedly leaving the premises and entering the street outside amidst a loud tinkle of shattering glass.

"And that's not to mention the winning of the Lost Treasure of the Sierra Mudry!" Dankwart blew out his chest.

Wilson's eyes narrowed. "My brother died there. I think we'd better watch this one."

"DONE IT!"

They all turned to look at Virgil who was using the head of an unconscious waiter to crack open his fortune cookie at last.

"Look a poem."

"Don't read it," yelled Shana over Mango's head, her arms wrapped around the lug's thick neck where she was being whirled about almost horizontally as Mango attempted the double hammer throw, a waiter in each super-powered hand.

"It'll be a stupid unfathomable clue that'll make us go on to another..."

"One Host to Attend,  
One Life to Feed,  
One Name to Summon," Virgil read aloud.

"...quest."

"Too late," grumbled Wilson.

Mango tossed both whirling waiters simultaneously with a mighty throw sending them crashing across the table of the two ogre-magi, splashing tomato sauce all over the imperious pair. The cafe went very quiet. The angry ogre-magi looked up over the tangle of broken crockery and waiters, and sighted on the A-Team.

"Whoops," suggested Mango. "Might be time to leave."

The air in the cafe chilled, began to crackle and turn blue. The A-Team grabbed their gear, Abel Zeek stuffing extra cookies into his pockets, and bolted out the back.

Shana was still clinging to Mango's neck, sobbing with frustration. "Just once!" she cried. "Just once I'd like us to leave by the front door!"

## II: A Disgraced Demon

*In the pleasant shadow of a spreading chestnut tree, in a wide meadow blessed by the last rays of a balmy spring day a sullen shape huddled back from the Disneyesque landscape, grumpily watching as the sun set with a blaze of glory behind a distant range of picture postcard mountains. In the tree, above the creature's head, roosting birds cooed at the day's end, their happy warbling mingling with the babbling of a little brook that meandered by the misshapen creature's gnarled feet. A playful otter splashed out of the crystal waters, lolloped over those same feet and headed back to the water. The beast howled indignation and clumsily kicked out at the otter; the sudden ferocity of the kick shook loose two smaller ugly shapes from the dark being's knobby shoulders. They screeched in pain as their feet touched the spongy turf.*

"Hurt, hurt, hurt," squealed one of the imps.

"Please let us back up, master," pleaded the second hopping painfully from one foot to the other.

"When are we gonna leave this hateful place?" wheedled the first imp.

"Me know," the second imp smirked. "Never. We is banished forever!"

The great-eared beast roared and swatted the two imps with a mighty blow, burying them to their necks in the ground. They screeched as if scorched by hot coals, then bounded out, scrabbling up over each other to avoid the turf.

"Damned imps! Silence! Your whining causes me more pain than all this place's blasted wholesomeness!"

"But it hurts us so," pleaded the first imp.

"That's because you're a nasty, spiteful little creature and this land of our banishment is meant to drive us to the edge of insanity!" the beast roared.

Somewhere above them, a nightingale welcomed the rising moon with its delightful song. The dark trio held their hands to their ears and groaned.

"But it not our fault no-one's frightened of you anymore," whined the imps.

"Frightened," the beast boomed. "I'll give you frightened!"



he roared, pausing only to brush a pair of playful squirrels who were depositing chestnuts inside his flaring trunk.

"Harrumph. I've had a word in the Bespectacled One's ear. Already dark, and needlessly convoluted plots are being set in motion. Soon minions will call for me, then we shall depart this place and visit terrible revenge on those incompetent swines that doomed us to this misery. I'll frighten them!!!"

Caraxus bellowed impotently as a bambi fawn gently nuzzled against his leg.

### III: The Secret Door

*After departing town in rather a hurry, the A-Team travelled back down the road towards the orcish stronghold. Around them the entire multiverse spiralled, the horizon miraculously keeping up with their walking pace; but then, it was all laid on for their convenience, after all.*

"Quest," said Virgil in a satisfied voice. "I love the smell of quests in the morning, smells like..., experience points."

Wilson turned to Virgil in disgust. "Will you shut up. I don't think it was a quest anyway, more like a dire warning."

"Oh, that is comforting," said Mango sarcastically.

"Pipe down all of you. It doesn't really matter anyway, none of you will remember what it said when the time comes," Shana prophesied.

"Well here we are," Dankwart announced as the party crested the rise to look down at the familiar silhouette of the decaying palisade surrounding a squat ivy-clutched tower.

*A sombre voice sounded from above, "Night falls."*

"This is gonna be a disaster," Wilson moaned. "Never go back, First Law of the A-Team."

"I thought it was 'When in doubt, do nothing'," said Zeek.

"No, 'Always turn left'," said Virgil.

Mango drew his sword with a flourish. "Let's get on with it. A hacking and a slashing we will go!"

"Mango's right...", said Wilson.

"I am?" responded a confused Mango.

Wilson continued, "...this place will be a pushover, we'll just go down the secret stairway at the back missing all the monster restocks, grab Spud and be home in time for a bacon sandwich for brekkie."

"Mmm," said Zeek, "sounds delicious!"

"In and out before the Chucker of Polygons knows what hit him," nodded Shana. "Great!"

"That's not gas spore tennis, HE'll be miffed," warned Virgil looking to the heavens.

"No problem. Let's have agander at the map, Zeek," said Mango.

"Are you sure about this plan," Zeek asked.

"Zeek, the map!" they cried.

Reluctantly, the cleric took a sticky looking bundle out of his backpack, removed a leftover piece of cake and handed the crumpled paper to Mango. The party gathered around to study the parchment. Apart from some jam stains, all it contained was a large X, and a straight line running out of the X.

"What's that?" asked Shana, pointing to a vague squiggle.

"It's the map," replied Zeek.

"A bit sparse on detail, ain't it?" observed Mango.

"Well, I was a bit busy, looking for secret doors and stuff," Zeek explained to his disbelieving comrades.

"What does it mean?" asked Wilson.

"That's the entrance, and that's the first corridor, and err, that's a bit of chocolate eclair," Zeek interpreted his scrawls.

"Right then," said Wilson clapping his hands together in workmanlike fashion, "In through the out-door it is. Off you go, Dankwart, find it."

Dankwart's brow furrowed. "Are you sure this is al' right?"

"Perfectly," Wilson cooed.

Dankwart wandered off to a promising pile of boulders not too far from the palisade walls. "Over here!" he called.

The party ambled over and looked impressed as Dankwart stood back from a doorway in the rocks, revealing a narrow, dark, stair leading down into the bowels of the earth.

Virgil fiddled with his codpiece.

"Are you laying on hands again?" asked Shana.

"No, girding my loins," responded Virgil, a trifle miffed. "Light the torches, and I shall lead the way."

Virgil strode down onto the stairway with the rest of the party following behind.

At the rear of the party, Shana turned to Wilson and said with worried look on her face, "Didn't take Dankthing long to find the secret entrance, did it?"

"No," said Wilson jauntily. "I told you he was good."

### IV: The Welcoming Committee

*Deep within the dark, underground labyrinth in an orcish barracks room, Shaman Ragnurk is conducting a snap inspection of his Honour Guard. These grunts with bad breath and worse dining habits are some of the biggest, meanest orcs ever to eat raw elves for breakfast. Shaman Ragnurk kicked the orc in front of him then turned to spit on Squelbum his mistrusted Lieutenant.*

"You all make me sick!" Ragnurk growled, then barfed all down of one of his orc guards to emphasise his point.

"Squelbum, if that bastard doesn't bring those lily-livered top-worlders, I'll, I'll...", he delivered a swift backhander to his astonished Lieutenant.

"But Shaman Ragnurk, what if they don't have It? There is not much time left to summon the Beast Who Will Rise Up and Randomly Slay Without Mercy!" squealed a querulous Squelbum.

Ragnurk fell upon his unfortunate lieutenant, raining down blows with huge mailed fists to punctuate his fury. "Who asked you to speak plot developments?" Ragnurk raged.

Squelbum attempted to squeak a reply through shattered tusks but Ragnurk grabbed him by the throat and began to squeeze with sensitive New Age claws the size of zucchinis.

"That, my boy, was what is known as a rhetorical question!"

"Shaman Ragnurk, sir!" a large orc yelled. "Beg to report lily-livered top-worlders that look remarkably like those who stole the most revered artifact are coming this way, sir!"



Ragnurk dropped Squelbum. "Well I'll be a goblin's uncle, so it is." A rare smile creased his odious face. "For once, that dragon-dropping of a half-brother got it right."

The A-Team clattered to an abrupt halt at the barracks' open doorway and peered in at the grotesque figures within.

"Orcs!" hissed Mango.

"Recognise them, Dankwart?" asked Shana.

Dankwart peered into the room. "Yup, them's orcs al'right." Dankwart then retreated to the back of the group.

"That was useful," shrugged Virgil.

"Normally they attack in a frenzied rabble. We'll just stand in this doorway and take 'em one at a time," Mango commanded.

The orcs, with amazing discipline, formed up into orderly ranks across the room with Ragnurk looming behind.

"Pretty unsporting lot," Virgil commented.

Ragnurk stepped forward and spoke out loudly, "Azgutrk noblid weffleham."

Mango looked over his shoulder, "Anyone speak Orcish?"

The group all responded at once;

"Goblin and Elven," replied Shana.

"Ogre, Treant, and Mongrelman," replied Wilson.

"Green Dragon," piped up Zeek, "all twelve dialects."

"Lawful Pompous," replied Virgil.

"Good, means we can't understand a word they say. We'll just have to waste 'em!" said Mango.

"I have the solution!" Wilson chipped in. "Comprehend Languages spell." The mage began weaving his hands in intricate patterns as he stepped in front of Mango. Slowly, the rest of the group filed into the barracks room.

"Greetings orcs," Wilson called out in an exaggerated accent. "We come in peace."

The A-Team waited for a reaction. All except Abel Zeek were hanging on the orc's next word; the cleric, however, was busily flicking through a large tome, a smile forming.

Ragnurk raised his right hand in the universal sign of peace.

"I don't believe it," Shana whispered in awe, "Something we tried actually *worked*!"

Wilson, his face flushed with success continued, "We come to trade this foot," he held out the charred relic, "for any remnant of the one we call Spud."

Ragnurk scratched his chin with a cruel looking claw. Squelbum was hopping excitedly from one foot to the other. "They have It!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Must be a trap," said the shaman uncertainly. "No one in their right mind would trade one of the multiverse's ten greatest artifacts for a potato!"

Wilson turned to the group to translate what he'd overheard, "They're weakening."

At this point Zeek's face lit up and he held forth the tome triumphantly in Wilson's face.

"Just as I thought!" cried Zeek. "It doesn't work. Only clerics can cast Comprehend Languages, so there!"

"Bring us the object and we'll give you what you want," Ragnurk finally announced.

The A-Team turned to Wilson. "What'd he say?"

Wilson glowered at the beaming Zeek. "I don't know," he said darkly, his fingers flexing angrily.

"Serve's you right," said Zeek grabbing the foot and waddling past Wilson towards the orcs. "I'll deal with this."

"We gotum foot to swapum for bitum of Spudum," Zeek babbled to an increasingly bewildered Ragnurk.

"I'll fry his fat!" Wilson exploded and raised his hands.

"Wilson, NO!" Shana screamed, "My hair has only just grown back!"

The A-Team leapt on Wilson in a panic. After a wild jumble of arms and legs, Virgil, Mango and Shana finally got to their feet with a shaking Wilson slowly calming down.

They looked around. "Where's Zeek?" asked Virgil.

Zeek and the orcs were gone. Dankwart smiled secretly.

## V: An Enlightening Experience

*One hour later.*

"This must be close to it. You can still see the scorch marks," Virgil said as the group peered down yet another corridor. At the end of this passage a pair of smoke-blackened double doors hung loosely on shattered hinges. From the chamber beyond came a strange dolorous chanting.

"OM NOMINE PADUA, OM NOMINE PADUA, OM NOMINE PADUA...,"

"Come on then," said Mango. "Let's get it over with."

"No listen," said Shana. "I have plan!"

"Ooooooh," went the rest of the group, unimpressed.

"I remember the last time we were here. There's a little minstrel's gallery at the back," Shana explained. "If Dankwart can find the stairs to it, I can sneak up there. Then while you guys make a diversion at the doorway I'll drop a rope and snatch Zeek. Then Bob's your uncle."

"Me like," snorted Dankwart.

"Sounds fine to me," Wilson agreed.

"Off you go then, Shana," Mango urged.

"No he's not," said Virgil confused.

The group ignored this remark. Once again, Dankwart miraculously revealed a secret passage, this one leading to a stairway heading upwards. "Follow me," he called to Shana.

The pair scurried off whilst the Virgil, Mango and Wilson strolled into the doorway to the great chamber only to be confronted by a scene of complete pandemonium.

In a vast vaulted chamber, orcs gambolled around a central altar composed of rotting corpses and broken bones. Above the altar a tattered banner hung with an ancient name scrawled in blood. On the altar lay a young girl with a charcoaled foot, the artifact, resting on her tummy. Ragnurk, the shaman, was standing over the girl, his arms waving rhythmically to conduct the chant of the gathered congregation. Beside him stood Abel Zeek, his chubby face creased in a beatific smile, waving the dishevelled remains of a dove's feather in time to the chanting. '*One Host to Attend Him.*'

"ZEEK!" bellowed Virgil. "What in the name of all that's holy are you doing?!"

Silence. The chanting ceased abruptly. A room full of piggy faces turned to the trio in the doorway.





"Well, you've got their attention, Virgil. Now what?"

Zeek waved. "Hi, guys. What kept you?"

"What is going on here, Zeek?" asked Wilson.

"I'm doing a mass conversion," Zeek bubbled. "I explained all the benefits; you know, the everlasting peace and harmony, the miracles, the snappy habits, pension plan and all that stuff and they got all excited and began singing and dancing salutations to Shannafria."

The A-Team could hardly believe their eyes and ears, Abel Zeek had never before even accomplished a good sermon let alone a mass conversion.

"Just one question, Zeek me boy," Wilson frowned, finally gathering his wits, "why the human sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" asked Zeek.

"Sacrifice?" asked the maiden, with a startled look.

"No, no," smiled Zeek reassuringly. "Marion's not a sacrifice. She offered to step in as a love maiden priestess role. A bit of a focus for the lads."

The orcs grinned wolfishly. Ragnurk moved from behind the altar with his Honour Guard in close attendance.

"Ere' you didn't mention no sacrifice," Marion swung her feet to the floor, spilling the charred foot to the ground.

Meanwhile Virgil, who was looking out for Shana, nudged Wilson. "See that name above the altar? Isn't that...,"

Wilson hastily clamped a hand over the paladin's mouth. "No-one kill anyone, or so much as breathe that name or it will act as a summoning focus. Remember the fortune cookie warning...."

*Above the A-Team, hunched on his huge throne, surrounded by Sacred Manuals and ivory die, looking down on his finely developed denouement scene, the Chucker of Polygons scowled, miffed that Wilson had actually worked out the plot.*

Mango nodded grimly. "Nuff said."

Meanwhile, Ragnurk was feeling a bit left out. He roughly thrust the girl back on the altar and barked orders to his troops, "Lily-livers wanem deadum!"

"Ere, steady on boys," Marion said indignantly. "What happened to the bit about me being a love goddess?"

"Yes quite," blushed Zeek. "We'll be getting to that soon enough."

Ragnurk's orcs lowered spears and advanced toward the A-Team trio whilst the shaman raised his hands to cast a spell.

Up above the chamber, in a balcony overlooking the altar Shana winked at Dankwart. "Perfect. Time to grab Zeek. Drop him a rope."

Dankwart nodded and did so.

Shana looked disbelievingly at the half-orc. "It would have helped if you'd held onto one end," she ground out.

Dankwart smiled enigmatically.

Ragnurk was really working himself up into a frenzy now, rubbing a glass rod with a dead rat and mumbling archaically.

"He's gonna throw a spell," panicked Mango. "Let's withdraw and reassess the plan!"

"Wouldn't worry," said Wilson oozing misbegotten confidence. "Sticks to snakes. The only spell a shaman knows. Any minute now a bunch of twigs will turn into a bunch of wriggling reptiles and we're supposed to run howling in fear. Pathetic I call it."

"Are you sure?" Mango didn't sound convinced.

"Get in there and dice 'em. Have I ever led you astray?"

Virgil and Mango drew their swords, pausing a moment to give Wilson a scathing look at that last remark.

"Onward for Truth, Loyalty and Honour!" Virgil strode into the pack of advancing orcs. Mango did likewise, chuffed as the ravening horde parted like the Red Sea before him.

"About time I was shown a bit of respect," he puffed.

The orc guard parted to reveal Ragnurk finishing his spell.

"Give it away, bucko!" smirked Mango. "A couple of snakes aren't gonna touch my armour class."

Ragnurk completed his spell with what witnesses afterwards claimed sounded like, "Eat this, Paleface!" and a thin bolt of bright light snaked slowly from his palm. It seemed to be sniffing the air in the chamber, seeking out something...

"Sure this is sticks to snake?" whispered Mango hoarsely.

Wilson squinted. Wilson looked thoughtful. Wilson shook his head. Wilson struggled to clear his rapidly drying throat. "Ch... ch... chain...," he began.

Mango wrinkled his nose. "Chain snakes?"

Leaning over the balcony's edge, Shana held out a hand and called "Zeek!" at exactly the wrong moment. A thin streak of white hot lightning caught her fair in the cleavage.

"Yeow!" she squealed and fell back.

"... lightning!" yelled Wilson, his face drained of all colour.

Mango looked relieved. "Well he can't have more than one lightning bolt. Let's get him!"

Wilson chose rather than to explain, to sprint back into the corridor shaking his head.

"Problem?" asked Virgil, watching Wilson scarper, then staggered backward as the thin bolt arced from the minstrel's gallery, speared across the chamber and pounded into his breast plate, electrifying him. "Yikes!"

"Well you don't see that happen every day?" said Mango, still unperturbed. Again the bolt leapt, blasting a tidy hole in Mango's armour, and setting his teeth a-chattering. "Aaargh!"

Wilson breathed heavily as he threw his back against the corridor wall. "Made it," he sighed. He waited a moment, then as the screams subsided he chanced a look inside the room. It didn't take more than a millionth of a second to register that he'd made a big mistake as the angry bolt of lightning arced from Mango's prostrate form and caught him fair between the eyes. Toppling him to the floor.

Zeek looked around, bewildered. "Does this mean the conversion's over?"

From above Dankwart smiled a lopsided grin and spat a sleep dart in Zeek's chubby back.

## VI: "Up yours, Caraxus!"

*The player characters were stripped of their gear, bound tightly and hung over a huge pile of wood faggots. All around them, the hated orcish scum danced and jeered at the finest adventuring team the world had ever know. To one side, Dankwart stood in deep conversation with Ragnurk and Squelbum, occasionally turning to laugh at the A-Team.*

"Told you Dankwart was trouble," Wilson spat, scowling at the treacherous half-orc.



"You can talk," choked Mango. "'Sticks to snakes' he said, 'All they know', he said. Yeah, right on, Wilson."

Wilson giggled.

"Now what's so bloody funny?" Mango growled.

"Have you seen yourself? Plus five this, magic armour that! Have you ever seen yourself without your gear on?"

The A-Team couldn't help but smile. Mango, divorced of the armour and Mighty Mitts of Mauling he'd inhabited as long as any of them could remember looked like an anorexic halfling. The blonde warrior snorted and fell silent.

Orcs bearing lighted brands approached to ignite the bonfire beneath the A-Team and Dankwart weasled forward. "It seems the brothers have you in a bit of a jam," he grinned.

"I think I speak for all of us when I say - go to Hell!" Shana spat.

Mango coughed. "Er, maybe not all. 'Live and let live' is my motto."

"Well that's all very nice. But I'm afraid we've come too far for that. You see, you have mocked He Who Must Not Be Mocked and now you will pay with your lives! A slow and painful death will feed his return," Dankwart gloated.

"Had worse," retorted Virgil, defiantly.

"Bah!" Dankwart snorted and skulked away. The orcs tossed on the burning brands.

"That's it then," said Wilson as the faggots began to smoulder. "Cybermech next week?"

"Do not despair, friends. I will pray for divine intervention. Shannafria will save us!" Zeek piped up.

The group laughed grimly. "This should be good."

"We must all join in. I'll sing the invocation, you guys join in on the chorus."

Zeek began to loudly sing a jaunty little song;

"Shan-naf-ria,  
We adore you,  
Come on down,  
You gorgeous goddess."

The disconsolate band joined in less enthusiastically. Ragnurk looked at Dankwart, more than a little confused.

"These guys really are crazy," puzzled the shaman. "Catchy tune though." He began to hum and the other orcs were coming in on the chorus;

"Come on down,  
You gorgeous goddess."

Soon the whole room was singing along. Dankwart listened carefully, sudden realisation hitting him. "Stop!" he cried, but too late.

In the centre of the room, a shimmering light appeared, slowly taking the lovely form of a stunningly shaped female dressed in a body stocking and thigh-high boots, a dove's feather pendant around her neck. The orcs, Ragnurk, Dankwart and the A-Team all stood in silent awe, their mouths slack-jawed open. All except Zeek who beamed with pride.

"Welcome, my Shining Mistress," Zeek spoke with tears streaming down his cheeks, "You have come to our rescue."

Mango wolf-whistled.

"Rescue," Shannafria's husky voice sounded distant, insubstantial. The sexy goddess pirouetted, surveying the chamber full of unwashed swine with growing disdain. "I have come to glory in the new flock you have gathered for me."

Ragnurk, recovering his senses, marched forward angrily. "Listen up! I don't know who you are, but you're interrupting our sacrifice and summoning. Bugger off!"

Shannafria looked astonished; she turned to her only living believer. "Zeek, is this not my new congregation?"

"Not quite, milady, but I'm working on it," Zeek explained through the increasingly thick column of smoke.

"Have you failed me again, Zeek?" Shannafria folded her bangle strewn arms and looked cross at her smouldering cleric.

"But...", Zeek spluttered, flames wreathing his fat form.

"No more excuses," Shannafria pouted. "You'll just have to work this one out yourself. I'm off to play Strip Canasta with the boys from Asgard. Catch ya."

The vision of loveliness vanished.

"Right then," said Ragnurk, "can we get on with it now?"

"I have failed her," Zeek mumbled forlornly.

"Stuff her!" Wilson grumbled. "It's us that needs a little hand right now."

Suddenly Wilson's wish came true.

Swinging across the room from a handily placed chandelier cord came a halfling of small stature but with a huge heart and a terminally ugly face.

"TA-DA!" yelled Spud, triumphantly. "A little hand is at hand!" The heroic halfling swung past the shocked A-Team, cutting their bonds with a deft backhand swipe of his dagger.

The A-Team fell in a dishevelled heap, rolling onto the floor away from the fire and bowling over a shocked Ragnurk.

"But how?" cried the Team.

Mango wasted no time in grabbing the fallen shaman by the neck and shaking him fiercely. "Chain bloody lightning," the sorely aggrieved warrior muttered.

"But where?" cried the Team at Spud.

Mango punched Ragnurk in the face, repeatedly, with extreme prejudice to the shaman's continued well-being.

"Aha!" laughed Spud, the diminutive hero of the moment. "After the last debacle I was washed away with the garbage, only to emerge in Sherdale Forest where I was nurtured by a Lost Tribe of Pygmies until destiny called me to aid you in your hour of greatest need!"

Ragnurk was falling to bits.

"Pygmies?" asked Wilson.

Mango jumped up and down, stamping Ragnurk into the flagstones.

"Well actually," Spud confided, "I just laid low in the library. I was on my way to the kitchen when I saw you messing about in here. But I thought the other story would read better!"

Mango kicked shaman broken bits into the air.

"Fair enough," said Wilson. "But what about this rabid horde?"

"Chain that, bucko!" Mango slapped his hands together, satisfied at a job well done. There was nothing the hulky fighter hated more than missing his saving throw.

"Solved!" called Spud in his new hero type voice. "At the rear of the balcony, a secret passage!" he said opening it with a stylish flourish.

"Let's go," cried Shana, clambering up the chandelier cord.



The rest of the A-Team followed as the orcs looked to Ragnurk for guidance. But Ragnurk was no more; the orc shaman was tattered and torn, bruised and bashed - in fact he was dead. *'One Life to Feed.'* An ominous stirring of darkness mingled with sulphurous smoke gathered around his corpse.

Dankwart took his cue and surreptitiously exited the room and the adventure to 'live to fight another day'.

On the balcony, before leaving the chamber, Virgil turned to grin broadly at the befuddled horde of orcs below.

"Oh no," said Wilson. "Do we really need a speech now?"

Virgil snorted haughtily and turned to his public. "Once again the mighty A-Team has triumphed...,"

Mango grabbed the paladin roughly and dragged him towards the exit. "Not now, Virgil."

But Virgil could not resist one last word. "And up yours, Caraxus!"

*'One Name to Summon.'*

The departing A-Team stopped in its tracks, and turned in utter disbelief to stare at Virgil. The cookie was crumbling.

The yellow smoke around Ragnurk's corpse began to form into a thick column; lightning sparked and crackled within it. The band stood on the balcony and watched in horror as the very fabric of the multiverse ripped open, and through the black tear, demon after demon spilled into the chamber, squashing orcs as they fought for floor space. Finally out stepped Caraxus, First Lord of All Demon. His mighty trunk drank deep of the air, his ears rippled hearing every sound. The A-Team heaved a collective sigh of huge relief.

"Thought we was in trouble there," said Mango, "but its only our mate from the first bit, the oliphant."

"Drats," said Zeek. "And me with no peanuts."

Caraxus roared. "OLIPHANT? I AM CARAXUS! FIRST LORD OF ALL DEMON AND I'LL HAVE YOUR SOULS TO TORMENT FOREVER!"

Around him the orcs and lesser demons fell to their knees and began to weep and moan in fear. Caraxus felt much better.

"Mmmm," said Shana. "Time to scarper." The group bolted through the secret door at the back of the balcony and along a corridor to a crossroads. They rounded a corner to find Caraxus filling the passageway, long trunk swaying.

"Back," squawked Mango from the front.

The group hastily retreated and turned along another corridor. It also ended with Caraxus.

"Yikes," squealed Spud. "Back this way."

The party fled down another corridor only to meet the same result. They halted before the demon's broadly grinning face.

"TELEPORT NO ERROR," Caraxus beamed contentedly. "MARVELLOUS."

"OK," panted Wilson. "We give up. What next?"

"WELL," boomed Caraxus, "I THOUGHT WE'D START WITH A MILLENNIUM OR TWO OF UNBEARABLE TORMENT AND GO ON FROM THERE."

"Oh, nothing too serious then," suggested Wilson flippantly. Caraxus' great brow furrowed.

"Give us a break, Wilson, and shut up," Mango hissed.

"I have a plan," Wilson whispered behind his hand to the party. The party groaned.

"You can hardly blame us for not taking you seriously," Wilson sniggered at the rapidly reddening demon.

"I mean where are the mighty magics you demons are renowned for?" Wilson taunted.

"WHY I'LL FRY YOUR ARSES RIGHT NOW!" the demon raised its viciously taloned hands.

"Fry! Is that all. Anyone can do that," Wilson goaded.

"Yeah?" the group agreed, remembering their scars.

"Indeed," Wilson continued rather too smugly for the rest of the party's liking. "Watch this for impressive."

He produced a small cube and tossed into the air.

"Where'd he hide that?" Virgil wondered.

"Best not to ask," suggested Shana.

Wilson pronounced the magic word, "Brixanmorter!" and there appeared Bugby's Banal Bungalow.

"NOT BAD," agreed Caraxus, "NICE GABLE. BUT WHAT'S IT PROVE?"

"A simple demonstration that my magic is superior to yours. Firstly, my assistant here," Wilson indicated Spud, "will enter the Bungalow. I then challenge you with your Teleport No Error to get him out. If you succeed we burn. If you fail, we go free."

Caraxus ruminated carefully. "I DO HAVE GENIUS INTELLIGENCE YOU KNOW."

He ruminated some more. "IF THIS IS A TRAP I'D KNOW."

He ruminated some more. "OK. JUST TO SHOW WE DEMONS ARE OF A SPORTING NATURE."

"Off you go, Spud," said Wilson.

"You sure about this?" asked Spud.

"Come on little hero," Wilson whispered. "All you have to do is run through the Bungalow and out the back door. I'll do the rest."

Spud walked through the front door.

"Right," Wilson challenged. "Do your worst."

Caraxus snarled then vanished. Wilson clapped his hands loudly and yelled. "Foreclosure!" And the Bungalow instantly collapsed back into a cube. A strangled cry came from within.

"Nice one, Wilson," said Mango. "Can he get out?"

Wilson shook his head. "Everything inside is magically condensed to atoms. He's a gonna."

"Where's Spud?" asked Shana.

"Should have leapt out the back," Wilson explained, a satisfied and smug expression on his face.

The party looked at the ground where recently had been Bugby's Banal Bungalow. There sat a furry foot.

"Must have been too quick for him," said Wilson.

The A-Team looked sharply at Wilson.

Zeek picked up the foot. "Well, looks like here we go again!"

THE END



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