

ZORCH'S INFERNO

How Zorch and King Taq escaped the nine levels of spell

By Tiffany L. Proctor

King Taq's foot was asleep. He tried jiggling it a bit, but that only made the numbing sensation travel up into his leg. Scowling at the tall skinny wizard who sat cross-legged on the ground in front of him, the king wondered how many more of these imbeciles he would have to interview before he found the perfect First Wizard for his new court. New, since his dragon, Zorch, had incinerated Taq's former court, along with his castle.

The wizard to hold the coveted title of First Wizard of the kingdom of Roshca had actually been a trio of magicians. They met with an unfortunate ending however, after their diabolical plan to shrink King Taq's castle in an attempt to take over the world went awry. Thanks to the bravery of Roshca's valiant king (and perhaps, the King admitted, though reluctantly, thanks in part to a major bout of indigestion on the part of Zorch) the three evil traitors had been fried to a crisp along with Taq's former home.

Three weeks after the nasty wizards had perished, Roshca's castle still was in the process of being completed, thus forcing Taq to conduct his First Wizard interviews outside on the grounds. How the king wished the royal laborers would hurry up with his new suite. He was tired of waking up to mosquito bites and dirt stains on his clothing.

With a yawn, King Taq attempted to rise and promptly fell over, landing on his face in the grass as his numb leg buckled and sent him tumbling.

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From his high vantage point on a hill overlooking the building site of the new castle, Zorch the dragon laughed uproariously as the arrogant and self-centered King of Roshca fell on his face in the dirt. The poor wizard Taq was trying to interview was uncomfortably trying to suppress his own bout of giggles and feign concern for the king's safety at the same time. Deciding it was time for some dragon intervention, Zorch rose from his slouched position and made his way lazily down the hill.

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"Ah," said King Taq to the wizard, as he tried ineffectively to cover up yet another tear in his silk vest, "here comes my dragon."

"Your dragon indeed," Zorch muttered to himself indignantly. "Watch out there, Kingy boy, or I might start referring to *you* as *my* dinner".

The skinny wizard, who called himself Freytor, was looking rather embarrassed, but obviously he was sticking around to find out whether or not he'd won the job. Zorch remarked silently that by the state of the man's shabby wardrobe, he needed the money badly.

Brushing at a chocolate cake crumb on his velvet cloak, King Taq failed to meet Freytor's eye as he said, "Frankly, wizard, your inability to grasp basic alchemy principles is a deal-breaker. When I asked you to turn that blade of grass into gold, you flailed your arms and spat and cursed at the thing, but it didn't do anything except twist itself free and fly away! What if I need you to concoct a love potion, or mix me up an anti wart remedy?"

Zorch secretly thought that King Taq might benefit from a wart or ten.

Eyeing the thigh-high castle lawn, Freytor replied, "Your majesty, grass makes for very poor gold. If I may make it up to you, I know many other useful incantations—"

But before the wizard could finish, and before Zorch could throw in his two cents, a royal messenger came panting up to the group and interrupted.

"King Taq, sir," the young messenger stuttered, "Your castle is nearly complete, sir, and the laborers wish for you to go inside and inspect it before they put the finishing touches into place."

"Excellent," the king exclaimed, beaming. He turned to Zorch. "Come dragon, let us inspect my new home." Forgetting the wiry wizard in his excitement, the king turned towards his new castle.

Suddenly the wizard had an idea. "Wait! Sire!"

Zorch and the king stopped and Freytor ran to join them. "Surely," Freytor commented, "you will need strong defenses to keep evil out of your new castle."

"Eh, well..." Defenses? King Taq hadn't considered such things are security or fortifications. He just wanted a bed to sleep in once again, and perhaps a fresh set of clothing.

"I can cast a spell," the wizard continued with a flourish of his wand, which Zorch suspected was merely ornamental, "that will keep unwanted people from entering your castle!"

"Well," replied the king, thinking of the three evil ones who had betrayed him. "Ok, I'll hire you then."

The wizard glowed, Zorch snorted, and the messenger boy ran ahead to push open the great wooden doors of the new castle.

With a grunt, Zorch managed to suck his rather large belly in enough to pass through the castle's front entrance. His girth had grown considerably since the day he'd devoured an entire village on the outskirts of Roshca, and even though Zorch had put himself on a strict low-carb diet after he consumed the village, avoiding fatty foods such as humans, the dragon's stomach still jiggled in a most unflattering manner whenever he walked.

The castle's interior was rather empty, Taq noted, as his small group came to a halt just inside the castle's doors. He turned to Freytor. "Wizard, cast you spell now to keep evil fiends from entering my castle." "Ahem." Freytor cleared his throat dramatically (Zorch rolled his eyes), and opened his mouth to call out the magic spell.

Feeling something tickle his belly, Zorch twisted his neck around to have a good look at the bottom of his stomach. Was that a flea crawling on him? Oh, horror. The dragon hopped from foot to foot, trying to shake the thing loose. Giving a squeal of triumph, the dragon took a might leap sideways, dislodging the unwanted visitor from his scaly hide, and coming down right on the wizard's foot.

As Freytor uttered a yelp of pain, his concentration on the spell he was casting broke. The air shimmered.

Suddenly, the wizard, the king, the dragon, and the messenger boy found themselves standing in the basement of the castle, on top of a large sheet of ice. A ring of nasty-looking giants encircled the perimeter of the room.

With a scoff, Zorch turned to a frightened-looking Freytor. "I don't think you did it correctly."

A look of horror crossed the king's face. "Wizard! he yelled, "You haven't cast a spell to keep anyone out. You've cast a spell to keep us in!"

The giants were slowly approaching the group in the middle of the ice pit, and even Zorch was beginning to feel uneasy. "I uh..." Freytor stammered. "I must have got it wrong when that foul creature attacked me, sire."

"I did no such thing!" Zorch grew red with indignation. Foul, indeed! "The only foul thing in this room is the wizard's breath." He blew a ring of fire at the offending wizard.

"Bu, but..." the wizard continued, carefully dodging the flames (Zorch was forced to give the man points for that), "I believe that if we can make it to the top level of the castle, I can un-cast the spell."

"Well we certainly can't keep standing here," King Taq muttered. A giant was eyeing the king with a rather hungry expression. "To the top, then!"

Quickly the party made a run for a staircase leading up that was poking out of the wall at the far end of the room. A glowing neon sign bearing the word “exit” and an arrow in the upward position, hung in midair above the set of steps.

But the ice under the travelers’ feet proved to be a tricky obstacle to navigate. King Taq, the wizard Freytor, and the messenger boy, whose name was Pall, all fell solidly on their behinds when they tried to make a getaway.

From the top of the stairwell, Zorch looked down on the humans and laughed.

“How did you get up there?” Taq demanded.

“I flew of course. You humans are completely helpless.”

In a rare gesture of pity, Zorch flew back down to the ice sheet (the giants, meanwhile were drawing closer to the helpless humans by the second) and scooped the others up with a wing, depositing them on his back. A desperate giant latched onto King Taq’s cloak just as Zorch launched himself back into the air. There was a ripping sound as the king’s velvet cloak tore free of its wearer, and Taq made a rude gesture at the offending giant.

The party emerged into a room full of deep chasms, connected to one another by spindly rope bridges.

“Eh, what’s that smell?”

Zorch curled his nostrils in disgust as he wove expertly around a large brown, stinking pile of something.

“Dragon dung,” he muttered. “Let’s high-tail it to the next level.”

A boiling river of bright scarlet ran through the center of the next room.

“Is that blood?” the messenger boy questioned excitedly.

“Might be food coloring,” the dragon replied.

The party was about to ascend to the next floor when a roaring sound came up from an island of burning sand that was smoking in the middle of the river. A tremendous bull-headed creature growled menacingly from the island as the dragon flew over its head. Zorch blew a cloud of flame at the thing, but that only seemed to spur it on and make it angrier. In reply, Zorch belligerently stuck his forked tongue at the creature. From his back, the beast produced a bow and quiver, and quickly notched an arrow. “Onwards,” Zorch bellowed bravely, and he began to accelerate.

The group had just reached the next floor when Zorch faltered. “And I thought I was fat,” he

remarked, landing on the floor and panting heavily. “You guys weigh a ton.”

“Perhaps you’re just out of shape,” Taq said, jabbing a finger at the dragon’s jelly belly. Zorch growled and flared his purple nostrils at the king. “I might break my diet for you,” he snorted.

“What’s that, a grave?”

“Tomb, most likely,” Zorch the tour guide remarked. “This looks like a safe enough area. Why don’t you useless louts try walking for a change?”

Everyone except for the king, who complained that his foot had fallen asleep again, dismounted, and the party slowly made their way across the cavernous room to the usual stairwell at the far end.

“There’s toilet paper stuck to your foot,” Zorch chuckled, pointing at Pell. A musty, dingy strip of yellow cloth had attached itself to the bottom of the boy’s shoe. Pell frowned. “That doesn’t look like...”

“Uh-oh.” Zorch looked back and saw three ancient mummies running after them. “Faster, dragon,” the king yelled from atop Zorch’s back. The dragon waddled, panting with exertion, but the mummies were drawing nearer.

The messenger boy screamed, and the wizard waved his wand around in ineffective circles, but the mummies were unstoppable. Suddenly a tomb in the middle of the room spontaneously combusted, bursting into flame, and taking out the nearest mummy. “Score!” Zorch bellowed, as the group reached the stairwell at last and ascended to safety. Er well, relative safety anyway.

“Oh no, not another river.” Taq groaned at the water source snaking its way across their path.

“Water!” Zorch exclaimed, and took off for the bank, where he dipped his head and drank greedily. He jumped back sputtering. “Something’s peering up at me from the bottom!” he cried. The messenger boy had approached and he knelt down to peer beyond the water’s surface.

“It’s an angel,” he exclaimed, “and its wing is broken.”

“An angel?” Zorch snorted. He spat and attempted to regurgitate. “Quickly then, this is the most frightening foe we’ve yet come across.”

The group made their way unacosted to the next level.

“Gold!” King Taq leapt off of Zorch’s back and ran straight into the next room, which was bursting at the seams with coins and jewels and great treasures. Greedily, the king began stuffing his pockets with riches while the others looked around in trepidation, wondering when the catch would make itself known. “Bah!” Zorch exclaimed, looking around. “The walls are closing in, the room’s getting narrower! Run!”

King Taq filled his last pocket and grabbed a hold of a jewel encrusted trunk and began pushing it towards the dragon. "Help me load this onto the dragon," he called to the wizard and the messenger.

"I'm not carrying that," Zorch said.

The king stumbled under the weight of the gold and jewels in his pocket. Slowly the walls were pushing closer together. Pell and Freytor had already reached the stairwell leading to the next level, but Zorch stood stock still in the middle of the room, watching the king inch forward on his hands and knees, unable to bear the weight of his stolen treasures. Finally he abandoned the trunk, but Taq refused to empty his bulging pockets.

"Why am I doing this?" Zorch asked himself as he grabbed the floundering king in his wing and drug the man across the floor to the others. "It would be so much easier to eat him. But I doubt the Roshca Weigh-less Company would refund my money if I broke my diet."

Treasures spilled from the king's pockets as he was pulled along reluctantly behind the faithful dragon. By the time Zorch had hauled him to the next floor, not only had he lost his jewels, but most of his clothing had been torn off as well. King Taq stood up and discovered he was clothed in only his underwear.

"You look better," Zorch remarked.

"I'm freezing," the king replied with a shiver. Wind and frozen rain pellets fell down on the party from high above.

"We won't survive long in this whether," said Freytor, "we'd better make for the next stairwell quickly."

"How many blasted levels does this castle have?" King Taq demanded, brushing off an icicle that was hanging from the bottom of his nose."

Zorch was breathing on himself, and basking in the comfortable warmth of his breath. He seemed quite content as he strolled along, until...

A giant table suddenly sprang up in the middle of the room, loaded with meats of all kinds. The table was crammed with slabs of beef, veal, venison, turkey, ham... and a lighter colored meat that made the humans quite ill just thinking about its origins.

Drool seeped from the dragon's mouth as he drew closer to the table. "Oh no you don't," King Taq growled as he and the others began pushing and shoving at Zorch's considerable bulk, trying to steer it away from the mountain of food. "I wasn't allowed to have my treasure, and you won't get yours either!"

The dragon shoved the pesky humans aside with a flick of his wing. He took another step

towards the food, and opened his mouth... and remembered how much he had suffered the last time he pigged out so carelessly. "You know," he muttered, "eating all of this might turn out to be a worse punishment than having an angel stare at me." With a sigh he backed away from the table, then ran back and grabbed a leg of ham. "The Roshca Diet Co. will never know," he told himself as he ran to join the others who were already making their way to the next level of the castle.

This floor contained a violent tornado, and a woman running around trying to hide from her husband, who was brandishing an axe, swinging it madly at anything that flew by on the wind.

Eventually, after Zorch managed to round up the humans who were being blown away by the violent gusts of wind (even the tornado couldn't possible lift Zorch off the ground) the group emerged on the top floor of the castle.

King Taq blinked to see another king sitting on the great throne that stood on a raised dais at the far end of the vast chamber. "What nonsense is this?" he sputtered.

People kept falling down from the ceiling (one or two bumped Zorch on the head on their way down) to land at the foot of the king's dais. One by one, the fallen people approached the false king, and he called out a number, two through nine, after which the person who had been assigned the number fell through the floor.

"Dragon, I command you to incinerate that imposter!" King Taq growled menacingly as he eyed the other king, pupils glittering with malice.

"Yes sir, Mr. Emperor, sir," Zorch said in mock salute, still laughing at the king's state of near-nakedness.

Just as Zorch (who, by that time had grown very hungry, and bugger the Roshca Diet Company!) was about to open his mouth and spew fire at the judgment king, Freytor stepped into the middle of the room, waved his ridiculous wand (Zorch told himself that if the fake king didn't prove filling enough, the wiry wizard would make a delightful side dish) and uttered a counter-spell.

In an instant, Zorch and the others found themselves standing back in the castle's vaulted entryway. Zorch's stomach was growling (the leg of ham had long since been devoured), but he was otherwise unharmed. The poor messenger boy, Pell, was glowing with excitement. King Taq was still in his underwear.

Red-faced, the king turned to the wizard Freytor, who was feeling quite pleased with himself for finally getting a spell right.

"Wizard, you're fired!"

Tiffany L. Proctor, owner of Finn Productions, is the writer/director/producer of *Obsidian Nights*, currently in post production. She is an Indiana Horror Writers member, and resides in Indianapolis Indiana with Ghaleon, a German Shepherd, and Prysm, a shape-shifting cat. For more information on her work, go to www.myspace.com/Obsidian_Nights.