

**Podo and the Magic Shield**  
*by Stephen D. Sullivan*

The tale, this is, of Podo the Mighty, hero of the Kzar and all Orckind. Lowly he was, and great he became. At the Siege of Alrisar was his worth first discovered and proved for all to see. Some say that his legend is but a myth, but those of us who fought alongside him know better. Until our final breaths, we will forever hold his memory in our thinkers, and his bravery within our giblets. While one Orc still prowls the battlefields of The Land, while one tribute fire still burns in the depths, while the villages of Prieska still run red with the blood of our enemies, Podo's saga will be howled for all creation to hear...

“Watch your head, grunt!” Sentry Zogg barked menacingly.

Podo ducked out of the way, barely avoiding the blade of the guardsman's long lance as it swung past. The weapon's shaft clanged against the volunteer's bronze helm, knocking it from his knobby skull. The youngster dived into the mud, retrieved his helmet, and dutifully rubbed it clean with his shirt tail.

Zogg laughed.

“I thought you didn't like using the lance, master,” Podo said. He eyed the weapon cautiously and rubbed his head where the long spear had clouted him.

The guardsman's bumpy green face twisted into a fond scowl. “Doesn't matter what you like in life, grunt,” Zogg said. “What matters is what you're born to do. I was born to serve the Kzar, and you were born to serve me. I do what I'm told; you do what I tell you. The Kzar says this battle requires a lance.” He hefted the weapon and made a few trial stabs. A frown crept over his mottled countenance; the lance was definitely not to his liking. Remembering his squire's presence, he quickly masked the emotion behind an angry glare directed toward the grunt.

“I'll carry it for you,” Podo said helpfully. “I'll have it ready whenever the Kzar says you need it.”

The Orc guardsman's scarred face broke into a broad toothy grin. “Damned right you will,” he replied, handing Podo the weapon. “If you don't, I'll skin you alive.”

“Thank you, master,” Podo said. He held the lance gingerly, as though afraid it might clout him once more.

“Don't let it droop into the mud.”

“No, master,” Podo replied, holding the weapon up higher.

“Time to march, grunt,” Zogg said. “The battle lines are forming that way.” He pointed toward the walled city of Alrisar to the south, the capitol of the Atlantean client-state of Prieska, and trudged off in that direction.

Podo scurried behind, making sure to keep Zogg’s lance up out of the mud.

The stench of blood filled the hot breeze and a crimson haze hung in the afternoon air.

Podo scrambled out of the way as an Orcish body flew past him. The body no longer had a head, so Podo didn’t recognize it.

In his fists, the young grunt clutched the broken shards of Zogg’s lance. The pieces were unwieldy and practically useless, but he hadn’t been told to drop them yet. Podo knew the place of a grunt was not to think for his master. At the moment, Zogg was too busy to tell him to drop the broken weapon.

The armor of the Liege Knights was dazzling. Sun glinted off their silvery carapaces, spraying rainbow colors through the blood-stained air. Podo had no idea how Zogg could see to fight these creatures. Podo needed to squint just to look in their direction.

If Podo’d had his ‘druthers, he wouldn’t have had to look at them at all. He would have been drinking grog in an Orcish camp, or playing a game of knucklebones. However, a grunt’s place in life was at his master’s side--or as near as he could manage it.

The best Podo could currently manage was about nine yards. He kept trying to move closer, but the melee kept intervening. Stepping across bodies--both of the enemy and the Orcish forces -- was difficult work, especially when carrying the master’s equipment, provisions, and his now-broken lance. Podo tried to yell to Zogg for instructions; dropping the lance, which he had been instructed to keep out of the mud, would have made advancing so much easier. Grunts got killed for taking initiative, though. Podo’s main goal for the battle was to avoid getting killed. So he shouted to Zogg, but the thunder of the battle kept the Sentry from hearing him.

The elves advanced and fought as a group, maintaining a wall of bright shields and flashing swords. They mowed down the disorganized mass of Orcs trying to overwhelm them. The elf military formation wasn’t flawless, though. Zogg had managed to cut one elf off from the rest of the formation. Now Zogg and the elf warred against each other atop a nearby small hill, amid a tangled mass of corpses.

Podo surged toward his master and promptly slipped on an Orc’s entrails. Podo didn’t know the Orc, but he felt grateful to him. The slip kept the young Goblin from being impaled on an elven longsword. Podo stayed on the ground as that elf and two of his comrades swept past the prone volunteer to engage five nearby Orcs. Podo scrambled to his feet, sparing only a brief frightened glance at the knights who had passed him by. He silently wished his Orcish comrades luck in defeating them.

Zogg stood only four yards away now, battling toe to armored toe with the towering Liege Knight. Fighting swirled all around the combatants; both were crusted from head to foot in gore. Their crimson-stained visages made Podo gasp, though he couldn't be sure how much of the blood belonged to either warrior. He'd seen Zogg fight many times before--and usually the gore draping the sentry's armor belonged to his foes.

Worry twisted a knot Podo's gut. He feared that this time, much of the blood belonged to Zogg himself.

Never before had Podo seen his master so taxed. The Orc's breath came in curt gasps. Sweat poured down his massive form--though the perspiration wasn't nearly enough to wash the blood from Zogg's body. The guardsman moved with a battle-weary sluggishness, though his red eyes gleamed with determination. For a moment, Podo imagined that he also saw a glint of fear in those eyes.

With a final, terrible bellow, Zogg rushed forward. The elven knight brought up his huge round shield. Zogg feinted toward the knight's head, then cut low, under the elf's guard. The sentry's wide sword sliced across the knight's midsection, cleaving through silver armor and the pale flesh beneath.

The elf grunted and dropped his shield as his guts spilled out. His blue-green eyes widened and began to glaze over. His eyes burned their dying hatred toward the Orc guardsman -- as though the knight might slay his foe with the stare. Zogg slouched forward, exhausted, reeling from his own effort.

With his final breath, the elf threw himself into Zogg. The Orc guardsman staggered back under his foe's weight. The knight stabbed his longsword downward, putting all his weight behind it. The blade pierced Zogg's shoulder and came out his armpit. The weapon's tip traced a long cut across the Orc's ribs, but Zogg's sturdy ribcage protected his vital areas.

The weight of the armored elf forced the two combatants downward, and drove the point of the elven sword into the muddy ground beneath them. Zogg howled in pain, and pushed the elf away from him. The silver-armored body fell back and rolled to the foot of the hill, where it came to rest amid a pile of other corpses.

Zogg slumped forward. His own weight drove the sword piercing his body deeper into the earth. He hung there, suspended just above the ground, quivering like a fly stuck on a needle.

Howling in anguish, Podo forgot his master's admonition and dropped the shards of Zogg's lance into the blood-stained mud.

The young volunteer reached his master's side just as Zogg slumped to the ground, still pinned by the elven sword.

“Master!” Podo croaked. “Master Zogg!”

Zogg raised his head. His red eyes showed pain, but no fear. He managed a half-smile at the Goblin youngster. “About time.... you got here...!”

“I’ll pull the sword out... I’ll....”

“No!” barked Zogg. The effort made him cough up blood, and a few seconds passed before he could speak again. “Fetch the healer, grunt...!”

Podo nodded and stood. He surveyed the battlefield, looking for the Orcish shaman. As he did, his eyes went wide with terror. An elven maiden wielding a bloody halbard was charging up the hill toward them, her weapon leveled for a killing blow.

Podo glanced around frantically, hoping for reinforcements -- but he and Zogg were alone on the hilltop. Of their allies, only corpses remained. Something shining among the dead caught Podo’s eye... the elven shield! The young volunteer had little skill with weapons, but perhaps he could still protect his master.

He seized the big round shield and raised it, just as the elf maiden came in on them.

The impact of her lance thrust Podo backward, into his master’s body. Zogg groaned, and his eyes rolled back in his head. His body went limp, unconscious, but Podo didn’t have time to worry about that.

The elf came at him again, and again he managed to interpose the shield between them. The point of her spear skidded off the shield and impaled itself in a nearby corpse.

“Flee, whelp!” the she-elf hissed at Podo. “It’s not you I want!” She yanked her weapon out of the dead body and slashed it at Podo’s face.

Podo tried to bring the shield up, but he wasn’t fast enough. The spear point cut across his right cheek, barely missing his eye. Podo yelped and staggered back, nearly tripping over his master’s prone body. The big shield fell off his arm and onto his lap as he landed on his seat beside Zogg.

The elf maiden smiled, her purple eyes flashing with hatred.

Fear and frustration welled up in Podo. A single tear spilled down his cheek, mingling with his blood, and dripped onto the back of the shield.

Podo thrust his hand through the arm strap and raised the buckler once more, fully expecting to die.

With a banshee wail, the elf warrior charged forward.

The sun poked through the iron gray clouds overhead, and suddenly the shield in Podo's hands became blindingly bright. Blinking in surprise, he interposed the buckler between his master and his enemy.

Podo gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut, and waited for the end. The elf's blow shook the grunt to his very bones, but--amazingly--the shield held. A crash like thunder split the air.

Podo opened his eyes in time to see the elf maiden tumbling back, downhill, her halberd sundered into tiny pieces. She fell to the ground and lay unmoving, though Podo could not tell whether she was dead or merely unconscious. A fine mist of blood hung in the air around Podo's glittering shield.

The amazed volunteer looked around for signs of his savior, but saw no one. He and his master remained alone atop the corpse-strewn hill.

"Did I do that?" he asked in a quiet, puzzled voice.

He looked at the shield. Something had changed.

Before, it had been silver and shiny, but covered in blood and gore. Now, it shone as bright as the sun.

Podo gazed at his own reflection on the back of the shield above the hand straps. Not a spot of blood or a scratch marred the buckler's mirror-like surface. It looked as new as if it had been forged yesterday.

As he turned its edges and gazed at it, he noticed fine, curving writing along the shield's rim. Podo wasn't good with language, but he managed to piece together what the words said. He thought it odd that the writing on an elf shield should be in Orcish. "To shed one's blood in defense of another -- that is the greatest gift."

A smile slowly tugged up the corners of Podo's dry, cracked lips.

"It's a magic shield!" he whispered.

A groan from Sentry Zogg brought Podo back to his senses. He needed to find help. If he didn't do it soon, the Kzar's bodyguard would surely die.

The fighting had moved past them now, but he spotted a knot of Orcs battling on a nearby hill. Struggling amid the carnage, was one of Kzar Nabar's shaman healers.

"Wait here, master," Podo said gently. He put a corpse under his master's head for a pillow, and tried to make sure the impaling sword wouldn't shift and further injure Zogg while he was gone. "I'll be right back."

Taking a deep breath, Podo charged downhill and toward his objective. His feet rambled beneath him, almost slipping, nearly tripping, as he skidded across the mud and the blood and danced through the bodies. The glittering shield strapped to his arm felt as light as a feather as he ran.

Amazingly, he made it to the new battle unscathed. A band of Orcs stood in a tight knot, pressed by a small phalanx of elven warriors. Swallowing hard, Podo gritted his teeth and charged forward. He held the shield out before him, to take the brunt of the blow and aimed at the elves' backs.

He caught the elves completely by surprise, driving the magic shield into the unprotected back of the formation. The attack scattered the elves in every direction. They all tumbled away down the hill, shocked and disoriented. The Orcs roared their approval and laughed at their sudden, unexpected rescue.

“The grunt has the heart of an Ankhar!” one Orcish Bone Grinder bellowed.

Several Orcs raced downhill to finish off their stunned opponents.

Podo, though, remained focused on his goal. “Sentry Zogg is wounded!” he croaked. “Without healing, he will die.” He looked at the shaman, who stood panting nearby, and his glance brooked no argument. “You must come... now!”

Wearily, the scarred and bloodied shaman nodded. “I will go with you, grunt.”

Podo grabbed the healer's warty hand and headed down the hill and back across the corpse-strewn valley. They moved quickly, and many times the old Orc stumbled. Podo kept the shaman going, pulling with strength born of desperation and the desire to save his master.

Ahead, Podo could see his master lying amid the other bodies. He couldn't tell, though, whether Zogg still lived.

Podo was so intent on his goal that he didn't see the three elves moving to intercept them until it was almost too late. The knights leaped across the bones of their enemies. Piercing war cries echoed from the knights' pale lips.

Podo whirled, putting his shield between the attackers and the Goblin shaman. The elves lashed out with their longswords, laughing as they came at the youngster and the old man.

Amazingly, the points of the elven blades slid off the shield--as if they hadn't touched it at all. Podo and the healer remained unscathed.

“The eagle gods be praised!” whispered the shaman.

Podo spun, clouting each of the elves in turn with the shield's smooth, silvery surface. The knights flew through the air as if swatted by giant talons. They landed atop the corpses, some impaled by the weapons of the dead, others merely knocked senseless.

The Orc shaman smiled and drew his long knife.

"We don't have time to kill them," Podo barked. "Zogg's life is slipping away!"

The shaman grumbled, but nodded his understanding. The two moved as quickly as they could up the hill to where Sentry Zogg's body lay.

"He still lives!" the shaman said. Breath rattled in Zogg's throat as the old Orc tended him, but the guardsman's eyes did not open.

"Be sure he stays alive," Podo said. He did not look at the oldster, but stood warily, surveying the battlefield around them.

"Aye, young Podo," the healer said, new respect for the grunt brimming in his gravelly voice.

Podo let out a long, relieved sigh. Thankfully, he saw no new enemies rising up to meet them. The elves he had vanquished were rapidly retreating; they had no desire to test Podo's mettle again.

Perhaps, Podo thought, we can rest a moment.

Just then, war cries echoed like thunder through the muggy afternoon air. To the south, the bulk of the Elven and Orcish armies finally clashed outside Prieska's gleaming city walls. From within the city, Podo could see tendrils of smoke rising up from a dozen places as the Orcs set the city ablaze.

The shaman looked up to see the battle as he tended Zogg's wounds. "No need for you to stay," he said to Podo. "I know a great warrior like you will want to join the battle."

Podo didn't feel anything of the kind. Looking at the fighting made his throat clench and his mouth go dry. He tried to reply to the old Orc, but couldn't find his voice.

"Go on, lad," the shaman urged. He rose and pushed Podo encouragingly in the back.

The young Goblin volunteer didn't expect the shove. His feet tripped over a nearby corpse and he found himself stumbling downhill. Rather than trying to stop--a move which would have surely ended in an embarrassing fall--he just kept going. Glancing back, he saw the shaman standing atop the hill, his arms raised in the salute warriors give one another before battle.

No turning back now, Podo thought. He steeled his nerves and gritted his teeth, but his stomach still felt full of worms. He kept running.

Traversing the body-strewn battlefield was dangerous, and Podo had a hard time keeping his footing. Navigation proved difficult as well; every time he dropped down between the hills, he lost his sense of direction. Only the cries of the warring armies gave him any indication of which way to go.

More than once, he thought about turning back. But the imagined ridicule of his comrades proved more intimidating than the prospect of joining the war again. He'd seen cowardly Orcs ripped limb from limb by their fellows. Podo certainly didn't want to share that fate--especially since he'd been doing so well recently.

The heft and brilliance of his magical shield continued to astound him. He never tired of carrying it, though it was almost as tall as he was. It seemed to turn away even the weapons of the dead as he passed.

Finally, his breath coming heavy in his lungs, Podo topped the last hill of the outlying battlefield. Before him lay the clear, flat plains that surrounded Prieska's mighty walls.

Two huge armies battled each other on the muddy field below. The Orcs were far more numerous, but the elves were better equipped, better trained, and better organized. As Podo watched, a wedge of elven cavalry cut off a group of Kzar Nabar's bodyguard. It was Zogg's old regiment. Nearly everyone Podo knew fought there. Soon, they would be crushed under the hooves of elven horses.

Podo's blood ran cold and a half-mad thought entered his mind.

If only he could reach them in time! Perhaps he could help. At the least, he could die in the mud with his fellows. His legs were so tired, though, that he could barely move. He'd run a very long way.

As he stood on the hilltop, panting for breath, Podo remembered something he'd once seen while bivouacking in the high mountains. It was between battles, and some of the Orcs had taken to snow-sliding on the round shields of their defeated enemies.

Those shields looked very much like the one that Podo now carried -- though, clearly, none of those had been magical.

The blood-red mud of the hillside didn't look much like snow. Still... Podo thought it might do.

The elf cavalry wheeled to begin their second run. The Orcs stood in disarray, trying to recover from the elves' first charge. Podo's friends had only seconds to live.



Taking a deep breath, Podo leaped forward, holding the shield under his belly like a sled. To his amazement, the shield's magic seemed to keep it from touching the blood-soaked ground. The Goblin volunteer plummeted down the hillside, gaining speed with every moment. Podo clung to the silvery dish for dear life; wind whipped his bronze helm from his head. Podo turned and saw it splash into the mud on the hill behind him.

The shield sped down the hillside like a diving eagle. Podo tried to steer it toward his comrades, but the shield was an awkward sled at best. To his horror, he found himself plunging right toward the oncoming line of elven cavalry.

Podo pulled on the edges of the shield, trying to change its course. All he succeeded in doing, though, was making the shield -- and himself -- spin like a top.

As Podo spun, he caught fleeting glimpses of the world spinning by: hillside, Orcs, sky, horses, mud, lances, corpses, elves.

Then he hit.

The world exploded and spun around him. Podo flew head over heels through the air.

He landed hard, and blood-caked mud splashed into his eyes and nostrils. His head rang with the clamor of a thousand storms. For a long moment, he thought he must be dead.

A sudden joyful roar made him open his eyes and look up. Around him his friends stood massed, gleeful looks on their green Orcish faces. Blinking the mud out of his eyes, Podo saw the elf cavalry in retreat. Many of the proud knights and horses lay scattered like ninepins in the mud behind him. Orc warriors surged forward to finish them off.

Spotting him, someone cried, "Podo's alive!"

"He did it!" shouted another. "That grunt broke the elven line!"

Podo found himself lifted up and held high in the air on the shoulders of jubilant Orcs. He watched, astounded, as the elf forces retreated back toward the city walls.

"We have them now!" a big Bone Grinder shouted.

Podo nearly tumbled to the ground as the Orcs surged forward to press their advantage. It was all he could do to land on his feet in the sodden earth. The Orcish army swarmed past him. Through their knobby legs, Podo spotted a glint of shining silver in the mud.

Working hard not to be trampled, he pushed his way through the crowd and picked up his shield. It remained untarnished.

Podo smiled.

Then, a battle song in his heart, he ran to join his friends at the city walls.

Thus, Podo the Mighty became a legend among all Orckind. Howl his praises when you fight, and remember to be as he. If you do, surely you will sit at his side in the afterlife. And remember Podo's greatest lesson: It doesn't matter what you like in life; what matters is what you're born to do.

### The End

Origins Award-winning novelist Stephen D. Sullivan has a basement full of projects that he's worked on over the last twenty-plus years. The stacks include Dungeons & Dragons, The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horrors comic, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Dragonlance, Speed Racer, Chill, Darkwing Duck, The Twilight Empire(tm), and many, many others. He wrote three of the original seven L5R samurai fantasy novels: The Scorpion, The Phoenix, and The Lion -- the last of which garnered him a nice trophy (the Origins Award for Best Game-Related Novel, 2001) to add to his clutter. Steve's newest book is Dragonlance Crossroads: The Dragon Isles (a 2002 Origins Award nominee). He's also the mastermind behind the long-running Twilight Empire(tm) comic strip, now being re-serialized in Campaign magazine and the new 1492 comic in Games Unplugged. In his spare time, he ghost-writes children's detective books and compiles proposals for new projects. When not buried under the weight of all that paper, Steve continues to write for books, magazines, comics, and games. He still does the occasional bit of artwork, too. More information on what's new in Steve's cellar can be found at: [www.sdsullivan.com](http://www.sdsullivan.com) -and- [www.alliterates.com](http://www.alliterates.com).