

Return to Firetop Mountain

Written by Christopher Griffith

*Based on the Fighting Fantasy gamebook **Return to Firetop Mountain** by Ian Livingstone
and © Ian Livingstone*

I am an adventurer, a sword for hire, wandering through the lands. Coming to the village of Anvil I decide to stop for a rest after my week-long march, but as soon as I enter its outskirts I sense that all is not well; the inhabitants look frightened, and as I walk along the main street women quickly push their children indoors. I decide that the local tavern will be the best place to find out what is troubling the inhabitants, so I enter the *Two Moons*, the chatter inside quickly dying down to a low murmur as the customers eye me walking up to the bar. The barman himself stares at me sternly, though I can see by the look in his eyes that he is a proud man trying to hide his fear.

‘Yes?’ he grunts in a low voice.

‘I am an adventurer,’ I declare, ‘seeking a new quest that will end in riches and honour.’ He frowns, unsure I think whether or not to trust me. ‘Does the name Zagor mean anything to you?’ he asks softly, watching me closely for a reaction.

‘Zagor,’ I reply confidently, ‘was the Warlock of Firetop Mountain until he was slain, ten years ago.’

‘Is the Warlock of Firetop Mountain,’ the barman says dramatically. He’s come back to life! He is building himself a new body and is sending his evil servants to Anvil to take back live donors!’ He leans in, seeming to accept me now. ‘In the last six months, sinister events have begun to happen around Firetop Mountain. First, its red-coloured summit turned deathly black. Livestock which have grazed on and around the mountain for decades have started to die a sickening death, and recently people have even disappeared, dragged inside the mountain (it is said) by hideous creatures of the night.’ He swallows. ‘We who remain are terrified, for it is rumoured amongst us that Zagor has risen and is building himself a new body, bit by bit, from Anvil’s unfortunates!’

An eerie silence lasts long seconds.

‘You’re a long time dead,’ sings one of the patrons, ‘so let’s live instead.’ We all look his way. ‘Ten years is not a long time in a wizard’s life,’ he continues, ‘some live for over two hundred years, keeping themselves alive by their own magic and potions.’ He takes a drink. ‘Some wizards even go one step further: they cast a spell on themselves so that, in the event of their being slain or assassinated, they are able to raise themselves after a predetermined time when their assailant is long gone.’ He drinks again. ‘The wizards who choose to come back from the dead are, however, always aligned to evil, for it is dark magic that is needed to cheat death.’

‘One of those wizards,’ continues the barman, ‘was known (and feared) by the name of Zagor, the infamous Warlock of Firetop Mountain.’ He sighs. ‘Ten years have passed since the day when he was killed by a brave adventurer who risked the guards and deadly traps deep inside Firetop Mountain to save Allansia from his evil magic.’ He scowls now. ‘But

killing Zagor is one thing; keeping him dead is another. Nobody knew that he had cast the Raise Dead Spell on himself, otherwise the adventurer who killed him would have sealed him inside his mountain tomb. We need help, stranger!' he says suddenly. None of us here has the power to defeat Zagor...but maybe you do. We are poor and cannot pay you what you deserve to take on such a task but we do know that there are chests full of gold inside Firetop Mountain. Will you help us?'

By now the tavern is silent, all attention upon me. How can I let them down? Slowly I smile and nod my head. 'On one condition,' I say.

'Name it,' the barman replies.

'That I get a hot bath and a room for the night!' I laugh.

'Done!'

Everyone in the tavern lets out a cheer and they all gather round to slap me on the back, offering to buy me some ale.

In the morning I find the barman, whose name I learn is Moose, cooking a large breakfast for me. 'You must set off south immediately to visit the Grand Wizard Yaztromo,' he says earnestly. 'He alone can prepare you for such an adversary as Zagor. Don't even think about tackling Zagor on your own. He is stronger than ever and his magic is deadly.' I thank him for his advice and bid him farewell.

Leaving Anvil and its villagers behind, I set off east deep in thought. Firetop Mountain is only a short distance from Anvil, but to go all the way to Yaztromo's Tower first would mean losing many days' valuable time. How could he even help? Ever since he single-handedly defeated eight ghoulish Dark Elves on the edge of Darkwood Forest, the place where he built his famous tower, his reputation has grown. Wise, good, powerful, philanthropic and many other words are used to describe the great wizard. Many seek his help against evil and none are turned away. Suddenly there is a shout from behind me. I spin round to see Moose racing towards me, noticing that his sword is drawn and he looks alarmed.

'Zagor will know of your plan unless we can catch the two Trackers I saw running from Anvil, a few minutes ago,' he says hurriedly, still panting. 'They must have overheard us and are running back to inform him. Quick, follow me, we must catch them.' He runs off into the undergrowth, shouting at me to follow him. I do so, keeping my head down to avoid the many outstretched branches, catching sight of something sparkling in the bushes and stopping to find a round, polished shield half buried in the dirt. I take it and then run hard to keep up with Moose as he zigzags through the undergrowth, glancing down at the ground occasionally for prints. All at once he stops and puts his arm up for me to come to a halt. I hear a rustle of branches to our left followed by a piercing howl, and leap into the bushes my sword cutting through the air. In front of us are the two servants of Zagor: they crouch, daggers drawn, and growl, foamy spittle dripping from their dog-like jaws. Half Dark Elf and half Goblin, Trackers are perfect hunters and messengers. Always armed with a cross-belt of throwing daggers across their chest, they will not usually fight openly unless cornered. Suddenly they throw their daggers at Moose and me and draw their short swords, but I am ready and raise my shield to take their hit. Wasting not a second more, I charge at the nearest Tracker who is no match for my superior sword which I thrust deep into its chest. Pulling my weapon free, I look round and see that Moose has also been victorious despite a deep gash in

his left arm. A search of the Trackers' bodies reveals 6 Gold Pieces, each stamped with the letter 'Z'. We agree to keep three each and I also take two steel daggers. Not content with emptying pockets, Moose pulls the boots off the Trackers and gives them a shake. A folded piece of brown-stained paper falls to the ground. 'I'm not touching that smelly thing,' he laughs. 'If you want it, you can have it.'

The folded paper is damp with sweat and an unsavoury smell wafts up from it. Holding it gingerly by the corners I shake out the folds to see a pair of blood-red eyes drawn there suddenly bursting into flame, causing my hands to tremble uncontrollably. I drop the paper to the ground, cursing loudly as steadiness thankfully returns to my fingers. Moose apologises at great length, blaming himself for my misfortune. 'Forget it,' I say reassuringly. 'At least Zagor doesn't know I'm coming.'

We walk back to the path together and bid farewell once more, then I set off east alone. By midday the sun overhead is shining brightly and it is uncomfortably hot as I walk along the dusty path. I hear the sound of someone whistling, then in the distance I see an old man leading a donkey, two large wicker baskets piled high with mushrooms strapped to the animal's back. As I approach the man, he comes to a halt and standing boldly in front of his donkey with his arms folded across his chest, he says,

'I'm Dungheap Dan
The mushroom man
I'd rather be a poet
Than a man who has to hoe it.'

He smiles and bows, as if waiting for applause. I open my mouth to speak, but Dan immediately interrupts with another rhyme.

'Take a mushroom, I won't tell;
When you're ill, it will make you well.'

I realise that talking to him would be a waste of time; I accept his gift gratefully, putting the mushroom in a bag in my backpack. Dan then sets off with his donkey towards Anvil, leaving me to continue east.

Half an hour later I come to a place where the path splits. Continuing east would take me to Firetop Mountain but I am resolved now to visit the Grand Wizard so I turn south towards Darkwood Forest and Yaztromo's Tower. An hour or so later, I hear a cry for help coming from a wood in the middle of the scrubland to my right. I soon reach a man who is lying stripped to the waist and staked out on the ground. Somebody has spread honey over his chest and face and he is being stung by hundreds of red ants that are crawling all over him. I hasten to cut him free, then roll him in the dirt to get the ants off him. Although he is in great pain from the angry red bite marks that cover his body, he is not in mortal danger.

'Bandits ambushed me while I was riding along the path,' he explains. 'Before taking off with my horse, they decided to make me pay for killing their leader in the fight. Thanks to you, their plan has failed. Here, take this as a reward, stranger; it's a Ring of Invisibility. I suppose I should have used it to hide from the bandits but it is a very old ring and has only

one more charge left. Off you go now. Don't worry about me. As soon as my horse is left alone for even a second by those infernal bandits, he'll come galloping back to me.'

After making sure the man is fit enough to be left on his own, I head south along the path.

The rest of the day passes without incident and as the light starts to fade I begin to think about finding a place to sleep for the night. I know the Dwarf village of Stonebridge is not far away, although I do wonder whether I will be able to reach it before nightfall, so I leave the path and wander into the undergrowth eventually coming across the ruins of a wooden hut which looks as if it was burnt down years ago. Ivy covers what's left of the walls and floor, and the people who once lived here have long since moved on. I decide to poke around the floor of the hut with my sword, and after several stabs into the ivy I hear a dull 'clunk' as my sword makes contact with something metallic. I cut away the ivy to uncover an iron ring which is attached to a trapdoor. Lifting it up makes a loud creaking noise, and as I peer into the gloom I hear insects and small creatures fluttering and scurrying below, seeing on the top step of the stairs leading down a candle and flint. I soon have the candle lit and climb down into the darkness, finding myself in a small cellar with just enough headroom for me to stand. Cobwebs are everywhere. There are two clay pots on a shelf and a wooden box lies under a rickety old table. Despite the profusion of insect life and small rodents, it seems to be a safe enough place in which to spend the night. I examine the clay pots. The first one is empty, but the second contains a large iron key with the number *142* stamped on its barrel. I decide to keep it, making a mental note of the number. I prize the lid off the box with the tip of my sword and discover a small leather pouch inside containing a wooden ball and brick.

Deciding to keep them, I put them both in my pocket. I make a bed out of ivy tendrils covered with an old sack, and after eating some bread and cheese I close the trapdoor, settling down to sleep. In the pitch-black darkness I can hear scratching sounds as the insects come out of hiding, but soon I am fast asleep.

In the morning, I wake to the sound of footsteps crossing the floor above me. I grope slowly for my sword trying not to make a sound but succeed only in knocking it off the step on which it is lying. It clatters to the ground and I snatch it up quickly. My pulse races as I stand in the darkness feeling like a trapped animal. Suddenly the trapdoor is thrown open and light pours into the cellar almost blinding me though I can just make out the heads of two creatures above me partially blocking out the sun, starting to shout loudly while jabbing their spears down the stairway. They are Goblins, descending the stairs into the cellar one at a time, something I use to my advantage by charging the first one back into his companion then leaping up over them and in a single movement snatching one of their spears to impale the pair of them together. A search of their bodies reveals nothing other than a silver amulet of a small rat which is hanging round the neck of one of the Goblins. I decide against touching it and make my way back to the path, heading southwards again.

A brisk three-hour march brings me to the outskirts of Stonebridge. I walk into the village and am met by two Dwarfs. News travels fast in Allansia, for one of them says, 'Welcome, stranger. We have been expecting you.' Seeing my puzzled look, he continues, 'A messenger bird brought us the news from Anvil. We wish to help you meet Yasztromo. It is your good fortune that you come to visit us, because Yasztromo is not at his tower at present. He has gone to the town of Kaad which is far to the west of Stonebridge, down the Red River. Plague has broken out there and he has gone to help. We are not sure if the sickness is of Zagor's

doing but we do have a fast sailing boat that can get you there in half a day; it is manned and ready to sail immediately. Come now, follow us, we have no time to lose.'

I follow the two Dwarfs through the village to the banks of the Red River where a strange-looking sailing vessel is moored: it is about ten metres long and narrow, but with canvassed racks sticking out on both sides. A five-metre pole pokes threateningly out of the bow, doubtless a ramming weapon. The mast is tall and curved, somewhat resembling an enlarged longbow, and the massive sails flap noisily in the wind waiting for someone to harness their power. Nine men stand in line before the boat, their faces brown and lined as all seasoned sailors' faces are. The Dwarf points to them and says, 'These men are good friends of the Dwarfs of Stonebridge. They will take you to Kaad.' Pointing at the shortest man who is standing at the head of the line, he continues, 'This is Sach, he's in charge. The helmsman's name is Lorrie. These others are Fyll, Eeyun, Stooy, Crook, Maak, Neel and Ndroo.'

I greet the crew and climb aboard the boat. The vessel feels very unstable, being so narrow, and starts to rock from side to side. 'We're out of here!' shouts Lorrie, jumping aboard. The two Dwarfs untie the boat as the rest of the crew also embark. They rush about their various tasks: pulling on ropes, balancing the boat, trimming the huge sails. The boat pulls away immediately, ploughing through the water at an alarming rate.

Ahead, I notice a rowing boat lying upside down and bobbing along downstream, an Orc clinging to the upturned hull. I tell Lorrie to slow the boat so we can pick him up and the crew quickly bring down the sails, our boat gliding to a halt alongside the upturned rowing boat. Ndroo throws a rope to the Orc, but it turns and dives into the river.

'Ambush!' cries Fyll.

Looking behind me, I see two Orc war canoes that had been hidden beneath the branches of trees along the river coming towards us. A hail of arrows is loosed at our boat, Stooy clutching at one that goes right through his neck, gurgling a dying breath and slumping forward on to the deck his legs twitching in spasms. Ignoring him, the remainder of the crew scramble to hoist sail as the war canoes draw closer, but Crook slips as he is pulling on the rope and it flies out of his hand, the sail crashing down on the deck. Fyll, Eeyun and Maak all take hits until Ndroo and Neel manage to hoist and the boat is under way quickly, leaving the war canoes far behind.

'Lean out, you lot, and hike! No more stops until Kaad,' snarls Lorrie, pulling hard at the helm. I am lost in the thought that I was responsible for the deaths of so many of the crew and sit huddled in a cloud of despondency. Nobody speaks for an hour.

A white dove circles then lands on the deck, and I notice that a small pouch is attached to its leg. Inside, I find a message from Moose:

Zagor has sent a doppelganger, a ghost-like impostor of Yaztromo to trap you when you reach Kaad. But doppelgangers always have green eyes and Yaztromo's are blue. Beware!

Wondering how Zagor has found out about my mission, I throw the paper into the river. The dove flies off as the boat continues its rapid journey downstream, at last gliding to halt at a jetty on the riverbank where a narrow tributary from the north joins this flow. I jump off the boat and thank the crew who meet me with stony silence; as they turn the boat around to sail back upriver, I approach the people standing on the jetty. There are quite a number milling

around, most of them poor and dressed in tattered clothing carrying small bundles and sacks, all appearing sad and downcast. I start a conversation with a tall man wearing a black beard and learn that he is waiting for a boat to take him upriver to Silverton so as to escape the plague which is devastating Kaad. I ask him if he knows the whereabouts of Yaztromo; he replies that he last saw the wizard in the town square mixing potions to give to sick people. The man tells me that if I follow the narrow tributary north for a short distance I will come to Kaad.

I soon arrive at the outskirts of the town and all about me sense an atmosphere of despair. The occasional person I meet looks either ill or scared, and there is a strong whiff of decay in the air. A cart track runs from the tributary to the town gates along which I see an old man walking towards me dressed in long, flowing, scarlet robes, his hair and beard long and white. From twenty metres away he calls out to me, saying, 'Welcome, stranger. I am Yaztromo, the wizard you are seeking, I believe.' He puts out his hand in greeting, his face suddenly lit up by the sun as the cloud passes by, his green eyes sparkling in the glare. My blade glistens in the sun also as I pierce the doppelganger's ethereal heart, the creature screaming then disintegrating and drifting away like smoke on the wind. I sheathe my sword and breathe a deep sigh of relief. Had the creature even touched me, I would have been doomed to immaterial existence in a twilight world.

I walk quickly into town and make straight for the town square; there I find a crowd of people huddled round a lone figure: an old man with long white hair and a white beard, wearing scarlet robes. 'Yaztromo!' I call out aloud.

A stern reply sounds above the noise of the assembled. 'Who in the world wants me now at a time like this?'

'An adventurer,' I declare, 'who asks you only to spare a few minutes to help him prepare for his coming ordeal with Zagor.'

'Zagor!' he shouts. 'If I hear one more person utter that infernal warlock's name, I'll turn him into a toad!' He waves his arms around and indulges in some unwizardly cursing, until finally he calms down and says, 'Now, my good people of Kaad, pass this potion of mine among you and you'll soon be as fit as firefoxes. I must go and see to this young whippersnapper who has just barged in unannounced.'

I walk away from the crowd with Yaztromo, telling him of my quest and asking for his aid. 'Well, as you can see, my help is needed here, so I am unable to accompany you. You will have to face Zagor alone and, since he is stronger now than he was ten years ago, you will need to call upon superhuman forces to combat his extraordinary magical powers. You must find the Elementals! Only the Elementals can save you from certain death when facing Zagor.' He pauses. 'Their material form is that of dragons' teeth cast in gold. Each one has a special power but you must learn the magic word that releases it. Then it will simply be a matter of throwing the teeth on the floor in order to activate them. Curiously enough, you will find the dragons' teeth inside the labyrinths of Firetop Mountain. It is part of the price for invoking the Raise Dead spell that its user must offer the chance of his own demise. But, as you would expect, Zagor has hidden them carefully. You'll need at least two – but the more the merrier, as they say. Now, I must return to my patients.' Yaztromo gives me a hearty slap on the back then returns to the sick people of Kaad. He stops for a moment, looks back at me and says, 'Go and see Zoot Zimmer in Hobnail Street. He's got a giant eagle that could fly

you to Firetop Mountain. And it might be worth paying a visit to Deep Sea Dowland's store in Pudding Street. He's got some useful items in there. Here's some gold to spend.' Yaztromo hurls a leather pouch in my direction, then turns to his ailing townsfolk without waiting for me to thank him.

I set off without further delay, heading for Pudding Street. I find Deep Sea's store at the end of a row of shops where sitting outside is a small boy playing with some wooden bricks. I say hello to him but he doesn't look up from his toys.

'If you're looking for Deep Sea, he's not here,' he says sulkily, 'but if you give me a wooden brick for my set, I'll go and fetch him!'

I am amazed by the lad's cheek and feel like clipping him round the ear, but when I take the brick from my backpack and give it to him his face lights up and he runs off, returning in a few minutes with a rather tubby old man chewing on a chicken leg; he is wearing a white apron and seems to be a jolly old soul. 'Shop's closed this afternoon,' he says with a smile, 'but seeing as you gave a present to Deep Sea Junior here, I don't mind opening up specially for you.' He opens the door and I follow him into the rather dingy shop; obviously many of the objects have stood here for years as they are thickly coated with dust. There's a stuffed bear, some juggling clubs, hoops, large vases, shields, lanterns, boxes, carvings, statues, paintings, bottles, urns, jars, books, maps, clocks, wigs, games, boots and hanks and hanks of different-coloured rope. 'Excuse the mess,' says Deep Sea, 'I must get round to clearing the place up one day. But people usually find what they are after in Deep Sea's store, that they do. The King of String, they call me! Now, how much have you got to spend and what do you want?'

I open Yaztromo's pouch and empty the contents on to the counter top. I count out 15 Gold Pieces, deciding to keep back five and spend ten. I ask what might be useful for dungeon exploration to which Deep Sea replies, 'Here's my list of equipment for that kind of foolhardiness. Everything costs 2 Gold Pieces. Choose what you like.'

He shows me a slate and using my experience I choose from it Rope, Hammer and Iron Spikes, Mirror, Magnifying Glass and Leather Gloves, handing over 10 Gold Pieces to Deep Sea. He thanks me for my custom and I leave the store with directions to Zoot Zimmer's house.

I find Hobnail Street without much difficulty. My knock on the door of Number 36 is answered by a tall, thin man whose ears are slightly pointed and who is wearing bright red trousers. 'Hello,' he says in a slow, calm voice. 'My name is Zoot Zimmer and you must be the person who wants to get to Firetop Mountain in a hurry. I can see by your expression that you are wondering how I know that. Well, I heard you talking to Yaztromo – I've got rather good hearing, you see. I'm a Half-Elf. Please come in.'

I follow Zoot into his house, the rooms of which are decorated to resemble a forest. All the walls have trees, bushes, plants, small animals and insects painted all over them from floor to ceiling and all in incredible detail, giving a very realistic effect. 'It's the Elf in me!' laughs Zoot. 'My mother was from the Vale of Willow; she lived with me here until she died of the plague. The decorations made her feel at home. She never did like living in a town.' His face suddenly loses its happiness and a deep frown takes over. 'Would you like some of my special herbal tea before we set off?' Zoot asks. I accept. The green tea has a distinctive

peppermint flavour, and a warm glow runs through my body. It must have secret healing properties.

Once we have finished, I follow Zoot into a courtyard at the back of the house watching him crane his neck into the sky and let out a high-pitched whistle. Moments later I make out a speck in the sky; it grows bigger as it glides down effortlessly towards us, a huge, beautiful eagle, its feathers magnificent shades of golden brown. With its wings still outstretched, it lands unconcernedly in the courtyard, completely unperturbed when Zoot fixes a harness and two-man saddle across its back. When he has finished the job, Zoot turns to me and says, 'Don't even think about offering me payment for this trip. I just want my mother to be avenged, as I am convinced that this terrible plague which is destroying Kaad is of Zagor's doing. Come on, climb aboard!'

I do as Zoot asks and, with a flutter of its massive wings, the eagle carries us high into the sky. Kaad is soon left behind and it becomes just another small feature of the landscape beneath us, the sensation of flying so exhilarating that for a moment I forget the dangerous task that awaits me. Zoot steers the great bird north-eastward high above the Pagan Plains. For half an hour we see no other creatures in the sky, but then our luck runs out, Zoot suddenly pointing towards the distant horizon where another flying creature is coming into view. I instruct him to land, the big bird gliding down to earth and landing on top of a large boulder that stands alone on the open plain. Meanwhile the flying creature passes by overhead, seemingly not interested in what is happening on the ground. After five minutes we judge it safe to continue and recommence our onward flight.

It is late in the afternoon when Firetop Mountain at last comes into view, its former fiery-red peak now deathly black. I tell Zoot to make the eagle land as close as possible to the cave entrance which lies at the foot of the south face of the mountain, the giant bird gliding down to land in a clearing. From the ground, Firetop Mountain looks menacing: the steep face in front of me looks as if it has been savaged by the claws of some gargantuan beast. Across the clearing is the dark cave entrance that I hope will lead me to Zagor. Few words are spoken as Zoot holds out his hand to bid me farewell. Soon he is in the air again, turning west for Kaad. I walk up to the cave entrance and peer into the gloom seeing a tunnel which is lit by burning torches. The walls of the cave are dripping with water and there are stagnant pools on the floor. The air is cold and dank and I hear the sound of tiny feet scurrying across the floor. Taking a deep breath, I enter and walk along the tunnel which soon ends at a junction. I turn left, quickly arriving at a stretch of the tunnel where it curves to the right. Here, there is a short, humanoid skeleton propped up in a recess in the wall wearing leather armour which is dusty and cracked; there are cobwebs over its face and its jaw hangs open. It must have stood here, undisturbed, for years. I walk on around the corner and see three doors in a row along the left-hand wall, all of them heavily padlocked with iron bars bolted across them; they do not appear to have been opened for years either. I soon come to a junction. Looking left, I see that in a further ten metres the tunnel ends at a wall so I turn right and come to another junction at which I turn left. A few metres up the tunnel I see three doors in the right-hand wall. Walking up to the first door I press my ear against it but I can hear nothing. The handle turns allowing me into quite a small room, its floor covered in bones, debris and dirt. In the far corner I see a chain which is bolted to the wall. Intrigued, I pull on it. The stone to which

the chain is attached starts to move, and as I pull even harder it comes flying out of the wall almost knocking me off my feet. I have opened up a secret compartment, but my head is too big to look inside so I reach down until my hand touches a jelly-like substance at the bottom, my fingers coming into contact with a small cylindrical canister. I lift it out and am surprised to see that the leather glove is smouldering – the jelly must have been acidic, I deduce, and it was fortunate that I was wearing gloves. The canister is made of iron. As I unscrew the top slowly green smoke starts to creep out but I continue regardless and it does not do me any harm, soon dispersing and drifting away. Inside the canister I find a dragon's tooth made of gold which I place carefully in my pocket. Then I leave the room and walk on towards the second door.

I listen intently but can hear no sounds coming from the other side. I turn the handle and find that the door is unlocked, entering into a small room which appears to have been an armoury a long time ago: there are three broken swords standing in a rack, some broken spears leaning against the wall in the far corner and various pieces of dented and rusty armour lying on shelves. The floor is covered with a thick layer of dust and I notice that there are footprints in it leading over to the far wall. While I am walking across the floor myself, the door swings shut behind me and the moment it closes some of the broken weapons start to move of their own accord, the swords rising from their rack and the spears shuffling out of the corner. I find myself surrounded by a circle of hovering weapons and know well that I am outmatched. Placing my own sword on the ground in deference to them, the jagged weapons encircling me also drop to the floor. I realise it is too risky to pick up my weapon again so despondently I leave the room without it.

Feeling defenceless, I make my way to the third door. This one is made of solid iron. I press my ear against the cold metal but hear nothing, opening it to enter a derelict room that was once a torture chamber, all manner of instruments of pain strewn about; branding irons, knives, chains, thumbscrews, ropes, whips and an iron maiden all long since abandoned lie covered in dust and cobwebs on the stone floor. In the middle of the chamber I see a rack, the skeleton of an unfortunate victim still tied there whose jaw hangs open as though still screaming in agony. On closer inspection I notice a gold ring on one of its fingers, but as I lean over to take it I hear a smothered laugh coming from above, looking up to see a weighted net dropping down on top of me and jumping back just in time as it crashes down on top of the skeleton. From a hole in the ceiling, a green, warty face with pointed nose, ears and chin stares down at me. It is a Goblin, angry that it has failed to capture me, shaking its fist and spitting before it disappears. I chase after him, climbing up the rope that is hanging down from the ceiling and attached to the net, scrambling through the hole in the ceiling into a small, candlelit room with stone walls and a low roof, too low to allow me to stand upright. There is a narrow tunnel in one of the walls and a large sword hanging next to its entrance, the blade made of dark, almost black metal and scratched on the hilt 'Darkblade Skullbiter'. The name sends a shiver down my spine when I realise that this weapon belonged to one of the fiercest Chaos Champions who ever lived, but why would it be hanging on a Goblin's wall deep inside Firetop Mountain? For the time being, my question must remain unanswered. With the Chaos Champion's sword in hand, I squeeze myself along the narrow tunnel. It is dark and I am forced to use my hands to grope along the floor ahead of me to avoid the chance of falling down an unseen shaft. About twenty metres further ahead, my

hand encounters an iron spike that has been driven into the stone floor. Beyond the spike, the floor disappears and becomes a total black void. I am fairly sure that the tunnel ends at the far side of the shaft since I can just make out a wall – a certain dead-end. Just as I am wondering how far down it is to the bottom of the shaft I hear the unnerving sound of metal grating on stone coming along the tunnel behind me. I feel trapped – perhaps it is the Goblin, but how could he be behind me since I did not find him in his room? I turn around and crawl back along the tunnel but my worst suspicions are confirmed: it is blocked by a solid iron portcullis which I cannot possibly move. Suddenly the floor beneath me gives way and I fall a few metres on to a stone floor, landing painfully.

I find myself in a small, dimly lit room which is bare except for a straw-covered wooden bed and an iron bucket. There is a wooden door in one wall and a small, barred window through which I observe the smiling face of the Goblin! I am trapped in his cell. I stand up and go across to the door, peering through to see that he is standing in his torture chamber; I hadn't spotted this door when I first entered – it was tucked away in a dark corner. He lopes over to the rack and gleefully starts to get it ready for me then begins to sing, an awful, repetitive chant gurgled out of key by a sadistic little creature from whom I still hope to escape. But how? I think hard, filling the bucket with straw from the bed and setting it on fire using the torch that is set in the wall. As the smoke begins to fill the cell and stream out between the cell door bars, I start shouting. I hear the Goblin curse and I stand by the side of the door, ready to leap on him if he falls for my trick. As soon as the handle turns, I charge it, knocking him over. Springing quickly to his feet, the creature draws his sword but I swing Darkblade Skullbiter slicing cleanly through the weapon! He looks stupidly at the two pieces of metal in his hands then drops to his knees in supplication, but I have no mercy for this horrible thing and cut his head clean off, kicking it from me as I make search of his pockets to reveal nothing more than a stale crust of bread. I climb from the cell back up into the tunnel, looping my rope round the metal spike and lowering myself slowly down into the inky blackness of the shaft to reach the bottom a few metres below. I grope around on my hands and knees and discover that I am in a stone-walled chamber, a large hole in one side the entrance, I deduce, to another tunnel. Seeing no sense in staying here I crawl along the new passage which leads into a candlelit room, littered with many skulls, human and animal alike. Two candles, both of which are burning in their brass holders are mounted on wooden pedestals on either side of the tunnel's entrance. In the opposite wall the passage continues into the distance, lit by a long line of torches. I step into the room and as I do so the skulls start to shuffle towards me making the floor by the tunnel's entrance look like a cobbled path. I take a couple of steps back, then run forward and jump as far as I can, just managing to clear them. Without stopping to look around, I run on into the new tunnel which ends at a solid wooden door. I try the handle and it turns, opening into another small, stone-walled room with a door in the wall opposite. There is a trapdoor in the floor in the middle of the room which is empty apart from an ornate oak chair carved with figures standing in one corner. Deciding against lifting the trapdoor or investigating the chair, I open the door opposite into a large room with a domed ceiling. The floor is made of polished marble on which three statues stand facing me, each mounted on a marble plinth; warriors, who all look as though their faces were set in stone at the very moment of a horrible death, their open mouths and screwed-up eyes giving the impression of sudden and intense pain. A fourth plinth stands on the floor but with no

statue mounted on it and there is another door in the wall opposite. As I enter the room to take a closer look at the statues, the door behind me slams shut; at the same time, a wide section of one wall starts to rise up. I can see the tail of a huge snake flick out from underneath and I hear loud hissing sounds. I turn my head away before the hideous creature can look me in the eyes, knowing that catching her glance for just a second will be enough to turn me to stone also. I search my backpack, hurriedly taking hold of the mirror, and with eyes tight shut stretch my arm out in front of me, hoping to reflect the Gorgon's deadly gaze back at her. The towering monster is almost on top of me when I suddenly hear a brutal, ear-piercing scream. Slowly opening my eyes I see her at once motionless, then beginning to tremble, her scaly skin lightening until it is the colour of sand. In a few seconds she turns to stone to become a statue in her own lair. I allow myself a grim smile while wondering what other hideous creatures still lie in wait inside Zagor's mountain labyrinth.

I investigate the adjoining chamber from which the Gorgon emerged. Although it has a high ceiling, the space is surprisingly small; there is nothing inside it apart from a clay pot standing in a domed recess in the far wall. I take it in hand and smash it open on the floor, a small ball of straw tied with string lying among the broken pieces. I cut the binding to find hidden in the middle a silver ring with the number 69 stamped on it. I try it on my finger. There is a sudden blinding flash out of which appears a dark figure wearing a long, hooded cloak, walking slowly towards me brandishing two shimmering daggers. I catch a glimpse of the creature's face and the sight turns my stomach: it is drawn and lifeless with decaying skin stretched so tightly across that the flesh is torn and festering. A maggot suddenly wriggles out of one of the creature's eye sockets and drops to the floor. With this Ring of Undead Calling I have summoned a Death Head whose sole purpose is to burn my flesh with its white-hot knives. Wielding them viciously, it spins the hilts in its hands so the blades rotate at speed, steam coming from them and in such thickness that soon I lose sight of my adversary. But I am not fooled, grabbing from my backpack the two daggers I took from the Trackers and flinging them underarm straight ahead. I hear the Death Head groan and in one movement as the steam clears I leap forward to grab the top of his cowl pulling it tight down over his disgusting face whilst I wrench one of the daggers from his stomach and bury it in the top of his head. His own daggers stop glowing and turn black. I decide against picking them up, retrieving instead the ones I have left in his body.

I walk over to the new door in the other room. It is chained and padlocked, but using a spear taken from one of the statues I soon force the lock open. Tugging hard on the handle I slowly manage to drag it open while its rusty hinges creak noisily; beyond, I see a torchlit tunnel. About ten metres ahead there is a door with a barred window in it. I tiptoe quietly along the tunnel and peep through the opening to see an Orc sitting at a rough wooden table being served what looks like rat stew by a grisly-looking hunchbacked Dwarf. An ugly purple scar runs down the Dwarf's face from his left eyebrow to his chin. The Orc is as ugly and brutal-looking as they come. I keep watching as the Orc pulls a rat carcass out of the stew with his fingers and eats it, head and all. Under the table I spot a wooden crate. Hoping to catch the brute off-guard, I barge into the room but the Orc immediately kicks over the table sending its stew bowl flying, then grabs its sword and leaps at me while the Dwarf runs into the back room. I am quick too though, intercepting and collecting the bowl then lunging at the beast to smack it on the nose with its own eating apparatus. As it drops one arm to clutch at its snout I

drive up with my sword straight through its throat, killing it on the instant. I hardly have time to catch my breath before the Dwarf runs back into the room swinging a warhammer at my head. Ducking low I pick up one of the carcasses that has fallen onto the floor from the stew bowl and slap him round the chops so hard he falls back to the ground, releasing his weapon which I happily pick up and use to bash his brains to pulp. I soon prise the lid off the wooden crate and find that it is filled with rotten cabbage leaves. The smell rising up is horrible but nonetheless I rummage through the leaves and find a small silver bell; I put it in my backpack, leave the room and turn right into the tunnel.

The passage ends at a stone wall. I notice some footprints on the floor which all point towards it and conclude that there must be a secret door somewhere so I run my fingers slowly over the wall searching for a tell-tale hairline crack or a hidden latch, and soon come across a loose stone at the foot of the wall with a handle behind it; in the dust there too is a large tooth made of solid gold. I take it then turn the handle, hearing a click as the secret door swings open inward, but at the same time the floor stone on which I am standing drops away. I cling on barely to what's left of the stone, looking down to see a spiked pit beneath. Pulling myself up and shaking myself down I walk on, soon coming to a junction. Ahead the passageway finishes at a dead-end though just before that there is a path leading south. To my right, the tunnel ends at a sturdy wooden door which is where I head next, trying the handle which turns. I peer round the door and see a human skeleton lying on the floor of a dust-covered room, a fine-looking sword in its hand, but I am happy with Skullbiter so I carry on through to the door in the far wall and on into a short corridor which ends a few metres ahead at another wooden door.

I listen but hear nothing, trying the handle and entering a richly decorated room, the floor of polished marble, the walls painted white although dull and faded now. There are four paler square patches, one on each wall where I guess paintings used to hang, and there is a door in the far wall which suddenly opens, a tall, muscular creature with long arms entering the room. It stops in its tracks when it sees me and starts to drool, its long, tusk-like teeth protruding menacingly from its bottom jaw. Armed with a spiked club, the savage Cave Troll runs forward to attack but I am more nimble and as its drool continues to flow from its open mouth I jump towards it slashing its tusk teeth clean off. The creature whimpers, leaving itself unguarded as I snatch its club and smash at its legs which soon give way under the weight of pain. It is simple then to dispatch the rest of this hulk and although fatigued I walk straight on to the door ahead, opening it to walk along a narrow tunnel turning briefly right then left where there is a small alcove. Walking on, I arrive at another wooden door with carved bone handle.

Hearing no sound coming from the other side of the door, I turn the handle to enter a strange, pear-shaped room with a rough stone floor; there is another door in the far wall and on one side of the room there is a pile of rubble. I suddenly spot a small creature lying asleep there. It has large ears and a long nose and is wearing only a loincloth, a dagger and pouch lying by its head. As I creep over towards the Troglodyte, I stumble and trip over the rough floor but regaining my balance I bend over the creature and pick up its possessions. Inside the pouch I find a piece of slate with the word 'arrow' scratched on it. I put this in my pocket and slip the dagger down the side of my boot. Seeing nothing else of interest, I tiptoe quietly over to the far door.

This leads into a tunnel which has been roughly cut into the mountain. It widens out, until I find myself in a large sand-covered cavern through which a river flows. On the nearside bank a few stumps of wood sticking out of the water look like the remains of a bridge. To their left, an old cracked bell hangs from a post. A sign is nailed to the post but it is too faded to read anything except the word 'Ferry'. The river is fast-flowing and looks too deep and treacherous for me to try swimming across so I decide to ring the bell, hoping to attract a ferryman. The bell gives out a dull clang and a few moments later a withered old man in a small wooden boat approaches the riverbank.

'Jump in,' he says gruffly. 'Two Gold Zagors to cross, payment in advance.'

I hand him the fare and climb into the boat. The old man rows me slowly out from shore. In the middle of the stream he turns the boat so that we start to move downriver, the water narrowing as the walls of the cavern close in, its roof lowering until I have to keep below the gunwale of the boat to avoid bumping it. Thankfully, the tunnel soon opens out into another large cavern, this one filled with giant crystals all sparkling and glinting in the light of many torches. The ferryman rows us to the left and we slide up on to a stony bank. I climb out and thank him but he says nothing, even when I help launch his boat back into the water again.

I stand facing two tunnels. The word 'PITS' is chiselled into the stone above the left-hand one and the word 'PUZZLES' is chiselled above the right. Choosing the latter, I step warily into the passage. In the distance I can see that it opens out into another cavern lined with bookshelves that are crammed with hundreds of books. Standing in the middle of the cavern is a black-robed person whose folded arms are concealed in baggy sleeves which almost touch the floor. A large black hood completely covers the figure's head.

'Enter, stranger,' his deep voice calls. 'You have chosen the path of the Puzzles, I am the Inquisitor. It is your task to prove to me that you are worthy to pass through my domain, and only by the power of your mind shall you do so. Fail, and you shall die. Step forward and listen carefully, your test begins.' I do as instructed. 'There are two puzzles that you have to solve,' he says holding his arms out in front of him, a sword suddenly appearing in his right hand and a dagger in his left. 'The sword and dagger that you see are together worth 300 Copper Pieces. The sword is worth 200 Copper Pieces more than the dagger. How much is the dagger worth?'

I make the calculation quickly. '50 Copper Pieces.'

The sword and dagger disappear from the Inquisitor's hands. He folds his arms again slowly and says, 'Correct. Now for the second puzzle. You must tell me my age from the information I shall give you. I first went to the School of Evil Magic when I was four and a half years of age and I stayed there for a sixth of my life. Then I went to the School of Demonic Sorcery for a fifth of my life. I then studied under the great necromancer Hellmoon for a quarter of my life and, since then, for a third of my life I have been in the service of Zagor.'

I take more time over this calculation. 'Ninety,' I say finally.

'Correct,' says the Inquisitor. 'You have earned the right to enter the inner sanctum of Firetop Mountain, where the harmony of the spheres aligns itself to Chaos. If you wish, you may avail yourself of my library before you go.'

Spurning his offer, I walk on through the cavern and into another tunnel which ends at a solid wall. As I approach this seeming dead-end though, the wall slides to one side and I enter a

large room lit by four candles standing at the four corners of a wooden table. A polished breastplate lies on the table. I examine it carefully, ever mindful of traps and evil magic, but it looks perfectly normal so I put it on. It is extremely well crafted and will certainly help me ahead. Seeing nothing else of interest, I open the door in the far wall.

This opens into another tunnel and after twenty metres I come to a door in the right-hand wall from behind which I can hear great gusts of laughter. I try the handle but it will not turn so I knock instead. A small hatch slides open and I see a pair of big eyes staring at me. 'What's the password?' a voice demands. The creature's eyes remind me of the sleeping Troglodyte's and I call to mind his slate so vainly I say 'arrow'. The door opens and I am greeted by a small creature with large ears and a long nose; it is indeed another Troglodyte. He is flanked by two Lizard Men guards. He looks me up and down appraisingly and says, 'No one told me any humans were entering the sheep's eye eating competition. Anyway, no matter; follow me.' I am conducted to a table set up in the middle of a large room around which three contestants are sitting, each with a plate of sheep's eyeballs piled high in front of him. I sit down to join them and gulp at the sight of the eyeballs in front of me. I look at the others and try to raise a smile. My opponent to the left is an old Barbarian wearing furs and a leather headband. The one to my right is a Neanderthal-looking caveman and the one sitting opposite is another Troglodyte who, although of small build, has a pot belly...and everybody knows that sheep's eyes are a Troglodyte delicacy. The Barbarian looks at me fiercely and asks in a gruff voice, 'Do you want a side bet on this?'

'Why not?' I smile.

'I only bet gold against gold,' he continues. 'No gold, no bet.'

I show him one of the Gold Pieces I took from the Trackers.

He grins.

We are instructed that on the count of three we must start eating, the winner being the contestant to eat the greatest number of eyeballs in five minutes. I pick one up ready to begin but the cold and slimy texture makes me feel quite sick. Then I hear the countdown, 'One, two, three, go!' I shut my eyes and pop it in my mouth. The sensation is dreadful but somehow I manage to chew through and finally swallow it trying to ignore the taste of liquid sloshing round my mouth, blinking through watery eyes to see the Barbarian struggling in equal measure. The Troglodyte and Caveman are already on their second, then third as the Barbarian and I lag behind but I am determined to beat him and do so finally as the longest five minutes of my life come to an end. While the trophy, a bronze bust of Zagor, is being handed to the pot-bellied Troglodyte I turn to the Barbarian and ask him to pay up on his bet. 'What bet?' he asks, an ugly smile on his face.

I draw my sword and he swings his furs back over his shoulder to face me, a two-handed battle axe at the ready. The others in the room start to cheer at the prospect of watching a good fight, but with the rancid taste of raw eyeballs still swilling round my mouth I make it a quick affair. Soon everyone, including the Lizard Men guards lie dead at my feet. I rummage through the Barbarian's furs and find a cloth pouch. Breaking the string I open it and find a large tooth, made of gold, inside. I put this in my pocket and calmly drink a mug of water to wash away the taste of the eyeballs. Although I am feeling bloated, the meal was actually quite nutritional.

Leaving the room, the tunnel seems to be never-ending but finally I arrive at a T-junction where I turn right, following it round a long left-hand bend until I come to a door in the right-hand wall. Listening intently, I hear what sounds like somebody chopping wood. The door handle turns and I walk in on a sight to chill the blood: a fearsome-looking warrior practising his sword play on a human-shaped block of wood that is suspended from the ceiling. Splinters of wood fly in all directions as the warrior's heavy two-handed sword crunches into the wooden dummy. He is wearing thick metal armour with spiked shoulders; his helmet is horned and covered with demonic symbols – there is no mistaking a Chaos Warrior. On seeing me, he raises his sword and lets out a war cry. Knowing he is stronger and fiercer than I am, I take the Potion of Invisibility from my backpack, uncork it and drain the contents just as he is upon me. He flounders, looking round stupidly as I take Skullbiter in my hand, levelling the sword then ramming it right into the one gap in the Warrior's armour, between his eyes, so that he howls in pain, drops to his knees, twitches, then falls at my feet. There is a straw-covered bed in one corner of the room, a table with a half-eaten bowl of gruel in another corner, and a box of assorted objects on a wall shelf. Numerous weapons are standing in a rack propped against one of the walls. They are all fairly ordinary and are probably taken from the victims of the Chaos Warrior. There is a leather whip, which I decide to take. The box contains bits and pieces that he must have collected over the years. Among the items I find a rat's skull, a copper bracelet, 3 Gold Pieces, 2 Silver Pieces, a page from a tiny book, a horseshoe, a calling horn, and a silver pendant on a beaded cord. I take the money and hesitantly I put the copper bracelet on my wrist. It is a magic band. My wounds are healed and a sudden feeling of strength surges through my body. Encouraged, I hang the pendant round my neck but as soon as I do the Chaos Warrior's body starts to twitch and with its head tilted horribly to one side revealing the gaping wound of my fatal blow it climbs back to its feet. I tear the pendant from my neck and throw it on the floor, frantically wondering how to deal with the undead warrior. As it lumbers towards me with its great sword outstretched, I try an upward thrust with my sword in order to strike under its breastplate. My blow pierces its heart and kills it. Not waiting to see whether it will rise again, I leave the room, slamming the door behind me, and turn right up the tunnel.

I arrive at a wooden door in the left-hand wall listening to hear the sound of feet shuffling slowly across a stone floor. Opening the door I see a hunched, pock-marked creature wearing tattered grey rags staggering under the weight of a dragon's skull which it is carrying across a filthy room. One of the teeth in the dragon's jaw sparkles; it could be made of gold. There is a large wooden crate at the back of the room filled with straw towards which the creature is walking. It is a Plague Bearer and, although it is not strong, a single touch of its hand upon my skin will turn me into one too, to live forever in a twilight world of servitude. But it is slow under its burden and I am still invisible, so with great care I move before it and quickly prise the gold tooth out of the dragon's jaw. I put it in my pocket and leave the room. The tunnel eventually ends at a T-junction. I turn right, the passageway ending at a wooden door with many strange symbols carved upon it. Various objects are also nailed to the door including old coins, a rabbit's foot, various small skulls, a copper triangle and a shrivelled ear. I listen and hear a woman's voice ordering someone to bring her a bowl of crushed maggots, walking in to behold a lavishly furnished chamber: the walls are covered with red and purple silk drapes and there are large, brightly coloured cushions lying on the floor.

There is an alcove in the far wall out of which a young boy appears, carrying a bowl; he is wearing a silver headband with a large jewel set in the centre. He carries the bowl over to a glass table where a beautiful woman is grinding components with a mortar and pestle. She too is wearing a headband, but hers is made of tiny flowers. Her gossamer-thin robes billow in the draught from the tunnel and she looks up and smiles at me. 'Come in and close the door,' she says in an alluring voice, not at all like the old croaky one I heard from outside. But the bowl indeed contains crushed maggots and as I look at her robes fluttering in the breeze I think I see just for a moment tattered rags. The illusion pierced I suddenly see before me a hideous-looking hunchbacked witch! Her wiry, bent and hairy fingers end in long, dirty nails, her eyes are dark and hollow, and her servant is a mutant beast with human torso and a dog's head. I quickly take the silver bell out of my backpack and shake it vigorously, a magical note ringing out so the Illusory Witch covers her ears, trying to shut out the pure sound. She staggers backwards and starts to scream before collapsing to the floor unconscious. The Dog Beast appears unharmed by the bell's ringing though, dropping the bowl it is carrying and charging at me swinging a ball and chain. I again reach into my pack, pulling out the wooden ball and throwing it past him to the back of the room. It works! The creature breaks off its attack to chase and I am upon it hacking into its flesh so that it cries, whimpers and eventually falls lifeless to the floor. I retrieve the ball and look around to observe that the Witch is still lying, unconscious on the ground. She is not carrying anything of any interest to me but when I look behind the drapes I find a metal panel with a handle set in the wall, a slot above it. 'Silver Coins Only' a sign on the wall warns. I place a coin in the slot and hear a metallic 'click' as the panel drops down a centimetre. I grip the handle and pull out a metal drawer containing a large dragon's tooth made of gold, then leave the chamber with renewed determination and walk back down the tunnel and on past the junction.

It is not long before I arrive at a great iron door in the right-hand wall. It is firmly locked but there is a large keyhole so I try the iron one I picked up outside the mountain and it turns, the huge door creaking slowly inwards on its old hinges. I find myself in a short corridor which leads into a large room. At the end of the corridor I spot a Goblin reaching across to a lever set in the wall but I whip the Troglodyte dagger out of my boot and throw it to hit him squarely in the chest. He slumps forward dead. After retrieving my dagger I walk down the corridor and enter what appears to be a meeting room. In its centre is a long table surrounded by eight chairs; the walls are lined with shelves full of books, manuscripts, scrolls and maps. There are several piles of gold coins on the table and odd coins lie scattered elsewhere about the room. A door in the far wall suddenly opens and an old man enters; he is wearing a long purple gown with a raised collar and a purple headband. 'Intruder,' he says grimly, 'you have no right to be here. But if you are smart enough, you may be of use to me. Answer my question and live – fail, and you die. Tell me, how many gold coins are there in this room?' I count them up, not forgetting the one he is spinning in his forefingers. 'Fifty two.' 'Very good,' the old man says calmly. 'You will make an excellent spy for Zagor, after I have made a few alterations to your mind. It is a simple task to alter the human brain for a Mindbender such as I. Now, should I change you into a servant of Chaos or make you just plain evil?'

While he is chuckling to himself I take the whip from my belt and lash out so the thin leather cord coils round his neck. With a quick jerk I pull him to the ground then jam the wooden ball in his mouth, cover his head with the bag holding Dan's mushroom and bind his arms with the whip to stop him from trying any sorcery. After picking up and stuffing into my pockets as many Gold Pieces as I can carry I take a look at the various books, charts and scrolls. Most of them are on the subject of the human and non-human brain. The charts are mainly of Allansia, in particular the areas surrounding Firetop Mountain. The scrolls are written mostly in symbols, but I do find one written in my own language: it is headed *The Elementals*. I read it and learn that in order to create an Elemental from a golden dragon's tooth the holder must cast it on the floor and say the word 'Cachondo'.

Repeating the word over and over in my mind, I pass through the door from which the Mindbender appeared opening into another corridor; this, I see, leads into a long, marble-floored hallway which is roughly twice the width of the corridor and is lined with what appear to be statues, three on either side. But in fact the statues are all Mummies, their shrivelled bodies wrapped in stained hessian. I enter the hallway on tiptoe, looking around as I go; at the far end of the hallway is a door. A clock suddenly chimes and the Mummies all begin to climb down from their columns, shuffling towards me with arms outstretched. I search my bag and suddenly remember the hammer and spikes. Not an ideal weapon but with some invention I might be able to put it to use. As the first Mummy is upon me I hammer one of the spikes into the ground and grab part of its hessian, twining it tightly round the hook. It restricts the Mummy's movement and as the undead strives to get away the spike holds whilst the rest of the hessian starts to unfurl, its shrivelled body falling to the floor where it breaks to pieces. I continue with the same process as each of the other Mummies approaches me then make my way quickly to the door at the end of the hallway in case they somehow come back to life.

I move into a small antechamber, the main feature of which is an incredibly ornate door in the far wall, a huge letter 'Z' standing in relief upon it embossed with gold leaf. Guarding the door is a brutal-looking beast, its outstretched arms resting on the handle of a large, spiked club. The creature has leather crossbelts looped across its hairy torso and sports two spiked shoulder-pads. While its head is wolf-like it also has horns and is far more gruesome. This is one adversary too far. I stride confidently over to it and notice it is eyeing my sword keenly. It snarls but continues to look at Skullbiter so I hold the sword out hilt first, the beast snatching it from my hand to look closely at the blade and even sniffing it. Satisfied that what it has got is worth having, it takes one of the keys on its belt and unlocks the great door. I waste no time walking through, looking wistfully back at Skullbiter. The beast snarls again. I enter a large chamber which is brightly lit by glowing domes on the walls and ceiling, observing two black-robed men with black skullcaps; between them they are carrying a body towards a marble table where two other men in white robes and white skullcaps are waiting with gleaming knives in their hands. The Death Lords are Zagor's personal physicians. On seeing me, one of them raises his knife and calls out. Two Goblins, armed with bows and arrows suddenly appear from a side room, taking aim and firing at me. I turn my shield in their direction at the very moment when they release their arrows and hear the missiles thudding into it. Urged on by the Death Lords, the Goblins run forward to attack me with their clubs but I swing my shield into the belly of the first who drops his weapon to the floor.

Picking it up I knock him senseless then face off against his companion; I have shield and club and he just the latter so the fight is short-lived. The Death Lords turn and run through an archway at the back of the chamber screaming at the top of their voices.

Entering the small side room from which the Goblins had appeared I see that it contains two stools, a small table on which lie two bowls of steaming soup, a staff and a wicker basket. A small, clawed foot protrudes from one of the bowls of soup putting off any thoughts I may have had of drinking that. The staff is made of polished hawthorn with a skull carved from bone fixed on top. I decide to take it with me, leaving the room and pursuing the Death Lords through the archway into a circular room with marble floor. At the back of the room, marble steps lead up to another archway above which is a single stone with the letter 'Z' embossed on it in gold. But between me and the steps stand the four Death Lords, huddled together on a gold crescent inlaid in the marble floor holding small metal spheres above their heads.

Looking at me coldly they start to murmur an incantation, the floor trembling as their voices grow louder. Suddenly it opens up all around me and I am left teetering on the edge of a deep chasm, the small stone island on which I am standing starting to crumble away and grow smaller. Without thinking I strike the ground twice with the staff and as quickly as the chasm opened up the ground closes again. The Death Lords look suddenly nervous as I walk towards them with the skull staff in my hand. One of them calls and they all throw their razor-sharp spheres at me but I am ready, again taking two in my shield whilst the others lodge in the wall behind me. As each sphere hits one of the Death Lords vaporises leaving only his robes behind in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Seeing the letter 'Z' above the archway at the top of the steps spurs me into action. I bound up and run through the archway to find myself in a palatial hall: a row of columns runs its length and at the end there are more steps leading up to a plinth. Seated calmly there on an ornate throne is the most evil-looking man I have ever seen in my life. The skin on his face is drawn taut across his skull and is held by stitches down both sides of his face. His robes are a combination of purple, black and white and a large red 'Z' is emblazoned across his chest. I am face to face with Zagor himself!

'Welcome, fool,' he says slowly and menacingly. 'I have been expecting you, although I didn't think you would get this far. But now your reward is a slow and painful death! It was considerate of you to bring me the last limb I need to rebuild my body. Your left arm looks strong – I'll take it.' He thrusts his own left arm out of his robes and I see that it is a skeletal stump. His right arm is also visible and I can see stitches all round his wrist where an oversized hand has been sewn on to a strong arm. This giant hand holds a crystal which sparkles in the yellow light from the domes and without warning he tosses it into the air, uttering some unintelligible words before catching it again.

The air in the hall starts to stir and soon builds to a howling gale. Zagor calmly remains seated on his throne as a whirlwind howls down the hall towards me, its vaguely human shape meaning it can only be one thing: an Air Elemental. I take the Dragons' Teeth I have collected out of my pocket and shouting 'Cachondo' as loud as I can feel them warm in the palm of hand. The noise of the wind is deafening. I cast a tooth which bounces up off the floor and breaks in two, a massive stone humanoid rising up out of the ground between the Air Elemental and me. It is an Earth Elemental that I have summoned, a great battle ensuing as head down it slowly pushes the raging whirlwind back until its evil forces are spent. Quiet

suddenly returns to the hall as the wind drops. The Air Elemental is defeated and the Earth Elemental shrinks back into the tooth on the floor.

Zagor looks surprised, then frowns while he concentrates on his next summoning, a fountain of water suddenly spurting out from the base of the steps and taking on the shape of a watery giant. Like a tidal wave it streams down the hall to engulf me. I cast another tooth to the floor which again bounces then breaks in two, a jet of air shooting up from the floor where the tooth hit spinning faster and faster. It increases in size until it develops into the raging whirlwind that is an Air Elemental. As the torrent of water roars down the hall, it is halted by an invisible hand, the wall of liquid climbing up to the ceiling as it battles to push past the raging cyclone which blocks its path, but the Air Elemental is stronger and pushes it back down the hall until it subsides into a harmless pool. The Water Elemental is defeated, and the Air Elemental shrinks back into the tooth on the floor.

Zagor, now angry, curses and shouts, his good arm gesticulating madly in the air as he summons yet another Elemental of Chaos. The ground in front of the steps suddenly erupts as boulders, marble and earth rise up and fuse together into a gargantuan stone humanoid – an Earth Elemental. I drop the third golden tooth on the floor and watch it break in two. A jet of flame shoots up from the floor and forms into a huge, fiery humanoid: a Fire Elemental. The Earth Elemental strides down the hall – but, strangely, the Fire Elemental does not move to defend me. Then I notice that a rat has picked up one half of the dragon's tooth and is on the point of running off with it. Unless both halves are touching the ground, the Elemental cannot be full released. I whip the dagger out of my boot and throw it at the animal. At such short range I can hardly miss, skewering it to the ground. The piece of tooth rolls on to the floor just in time to release the Fire Elemental as the massive Earth Elemental is descending on me, The former wrapping a fiery arm round its waist in attempt to lift it off the ground at the same time it is being pounded by gigantic stone fists. The battle rages for some minutes until finally the Earth Elemental crumbles into a heap of broken boulders and scorched earth. The flame dies and I look up to the throne where Zagor sits, looking ill-at-ease. He begins to chant again, a jet of flame suddenly shooting out of the floor at the bottom of the steps. Another fiery humanoid has been summoned, his own Fire Elemental, the last of these Elementals of Chaos. I drop the final tooth on the floor and watch it break in two, a fountain of water shooting up out of the floor forming into the shape of a liquid Titan. Suddenly it flows forward and crashes down on top of the Fire Elemental in a giant cloud of steam, hissing loudly as it battles with the flames. For a moment it looks as if the Water Elemental will boil away to nothing but gradually the flames die down and go out. Quiet returns to the hall as the Water Elemental retreats to the tooth. When the steam clears, I see Zagor standing at the base of the steps. He looks shaken and stands with his head a little down. Perhaps his magic power is all but spent?

‘We will finish this battle with a duel,’ he says solemnly. ‘We will fight with long knives and wearing no armour. Accept this challenge or with my last energies I will crush you with a thunderbolt. We are equals, you and I, and we must fight on equal terms. It is the struggle between Chaos and Order we must decide. If I win, Chaos will swallow Allansia. If I lose, Order will return. Prepare to die! Chaos awaits Allansia!’

Zagor removes his robes and stands bare-chested before me. Ugly red scars cover his body as a result of the many transplants he has received and the skeletal stump that is his left arm

protrudes awkwardly from his shoulder. I shudder at the sight of him; I know I must accept his challenge, so I remove my armour and he throws me a knife. Brandishing our weapons we circle one another then engage, lunging, ducking, swiping, parrying until the Warlock takes first blood, gouging a chunk from the arm with which I am holding my knife. But as he does so, I grab hold of his own arm and manage to cut through enough of the stitches round his wrist to cause the outsized hand there to flop loosely. He drops his knife and bends to retrieve it whereupon I rush to pick up his robes, spinning round to throw them over his head just as he is launching another attack. They are thick indeed, the colours and embossed 'Z' lending them a weight which I use to full advantage by attempting to smother him to death. But his struggle is great and I am losing control of my grip when I spot lying on the ground near his throne the crystal with which he summoned the Elementals. I thrust my knife into the robes in hope of wounding him but the material swallows it as I launch myself in dive to grab the object. Zagor is just escaped from his cloak when I smash the object over his head, shards of glass jamming themselves into his brain and blue liquid pouring down the stitches on his face along the red scars on his body to the floor. Vainly, he tries to summon Thunderbolt against me but the spell is weak and with my blade I deflect the lightning back into his already weakened person. He collapses to the floor and doesn't move. The Warlock of Firetop Mountain is defeated and Allansia is saved! Still panting heavily from exhaustion I stand over his body and the sickening sight of his stitches now bursting open grotesquely. I walk up the steps to his throne which is made of solid gold set with hundreds of jewels. My fortune is there for the taking, so I fill my backpack with the treasure and eventually find my way out of the mountain labyrinth.

In just over a day I am back in Anvil recounting my quest to the cheering villagers. 'Zagor is dead! Long live Allansia!' they all chant. Filled with excitement they ask me to lead them back to Firetop Mountain so they can witness Zagor's demise for themselves and collect some of his treasure. I finally agree but put a limit of ten on the party to accompany me. The twisting labyrinth of passages appears deserted; Zagor's guards and servants have all fled. When we finally reach the Warlock's hall, we find his body still lying, face down, where it had fallen. The villagers crowd round it laughing, commenting and arguing. I walk over and roll the body over with my foot. A sudden gasp comes from my companions; there is a big smile on Zagor's face and his eyes are wide open, although he is undoubtedly dead. But the thing that worries me most is that his skeletal left arm is missing, and that was the only bit of Zagor that was truly his own. Could that bony stump grow into another incarnation of the Warlock? Surely not...