

Saga of the Stormslayer

By Christopher Griffith

*Based on the Fighting Fantasy gamebook by Jonathan Green,
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Prologue

The Traveller's Rest tavern, Vastarin.

Aldar Ravenwolf is coming to the end of his tale. 'And that's how I bested Gog Magog, chief of the Giant tribe, and rescued Duke Ervane's daughter!' He breaks into a broad smile, grabs his flagon of ale, and downs it to the dregs.

For a brief moment the room is silent before its gathered clientele burst into a round of applause, whoops and cheers ringing gratifyingly in his ears. 'Another story!' shouts someone from the far side of the bar.

'Yes,' gushes a barmaid, 'tell us another tale!'

Aldar smiles broadly. 'Very well then.' An expectant hush descends upon the packed pub. 'But which one do you want to hear?'

'Tell us how you found your fabled sword,' a mop-haired youth calls out.

'Wyrmbiter,' says Aldar putting a hand to the wondrous weapon sheathed from his sword belt.

'No!' cries another, 'we want to know how you snared the Basilisk of Bonebarrow.'

'And how you recovered the Wraith Dragon's hoard,' bellows a grey-bearded Dwarf.

You study them one at a time. 'Flagons for everyone!' you boom at last. 'Time is no master of mine. I shall tell you them all. And more.'

Great cheer once again erupts, cut short as the door to the tavern bangs open and a vast man enters, followed by his cut-throat band. He scowls when he sees you, the livid purple scar that splits his face curling his lip into an ugly sneer. You scoop up your ale, raising it towards your old adversary whilst smiling inside knowing the vessel is empty of drink. ‘Bad luck, Varick, but you just weren’t quick enough...again.’ Varick advances. ‘Careful,’ you continue, ‘or I’ll carve you another scar to split your face in four!’

He bursts into laughter. ‘Hero of Tannatown. ‘What tales of bravery has he told?’

‘He saved them from the Crimson Witch.’

‘He snared the basilisk.’

‘He took the hoard.’

‘All by himself? This one’s no hero. He’s mercenary, selling himself to the highest bidder.’

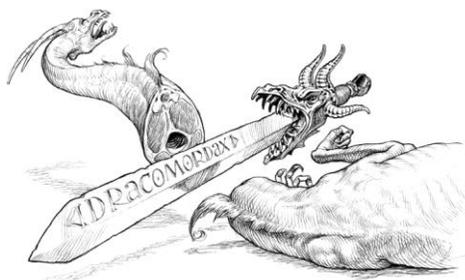
‘Careful, Oathbreaker.’

‘He protects merchant caravans. Go on, Ravenwolf, tell them. His parents were traders. Merchants themselves, until they were slain upon the Howling Plains.’ I cast sideways glance to see that the assembled are still with me. ‘That’s why he wanders Femphrey. He’s an outcast. You should shun him, like everyone else does in this land.’

‘He’s our hero,’ says the barmaid standing. She advances on Oathbreaker. ‘And you are a villain.’ She throws a full flagon of ale over him, the froth clinging to his beard like snow.

The Traveller’s Rest once again erupts with laughter.

Varick glares at the barmaid. I move in between them. Oathbreaker stares me down. ‘You want to keep an eye out, Orphan of Lendleland. There’s a storm coming. Mark my words, there’s a storm heading your way!’ A crash of thunder explodes right over the tavern, then again, shaking the building to its very foundations, a flash of lightning scorching the building with searing flame. ‘What in Sukh’s name was that?’ he gasps as the sound of smashing tiles joins the roar of the storm, hailstones lashing the roof of *The Traveller’s Rest*...



The Storm

...I throw open the door of the tavern and gaze upon the mayhem engulfing Vastarin. Black sky explodes with thunder. Lightning streaks fork down, scorching the earth. Strong gales sweep over the rooftops, tearing thatch from houses to strike helpless villagers already panicked by the bombardment of hailstones the size of grapefruits. Resolved, I instantly make for the thick of the storm, sprinting into the path of the hurtling hailstones where they appear to be falling hardest. Sent reeling by one that hits me on the head I am caught for a moment in total whiteout as a blizzard of stinging ice flakes engulfs me, and then I break through into the very eye of the whirling storm to see a creature taller by half than any man I had ever met before, its body blue-white ice, one arm ending in a huge fist of frozen water whilst the other bristles with spiky icicles – an Ice Elemental, its frosty maw packed with frozen fangs, cracking open to howl with a voice like winter wind. Quickly I draw Wyrmbiter, but before I can slash at the creature I am hit by a blast of freezing breath, paralyzing my sword arm. Wyrmbiter falls to the ground. I pick my trusty friend up with my wrong hand ready to strike again, when the monster clubs me with its huge right fist. But the Hero of Tannatown is unfazed. As the Elemental fires icy darts from its left fist, I strike them back into its body so that it shatters into a million tiny shards, quickly carried away by the howling wind. And then suddenly that is gone too. The pounding hail peters out. Lightning ceases. The storm moves on. I look to the sky where, as the thunderclouds drift away to the north, I think I see in their departure a flash of gold, or is it brass? I shake my head and look again, but it is gone. Yet the suspicion remains – I am convinced I saw a bizarre craft amidst the clouds, shaped like some huge, brass fish.

The villagers start to emerge from where they have sheltered, gazing upon a Vastarin storm-ravaged to ruin. Even the *Traveller's Rest* has been flattened though its clientele remain, standing outside. 'What just happened?' asks the barmaid in bewilderment.

'Where in the Old World did it come from?' gulps the mop-haired youth.

'The south,' says the grey-bearded dwarf, 'but it blew in so quickly.'

'North,' adds Oathbreaker, 'it's gone north, to Chalannabrad. The Mages won't have it.'

I collect my backpack. 'I thought I saw a flying machine, in the clouds. Fish-shaped.' I note their concern. 'Don't be afraid. I swear on my honour, as the Hero of Tannatown, that I shall discover who was behind this attack, and make them pay.' Whoops and cheers sound in my ears for the second time that afternoon. I start to walk off.

'But you're heading south.'

'Yes, to its origin. I'll find answers there, or along its path of devastation.'

‘Be careful.’

‘I’ll be fine.’ I touch Wyrmbiter. ‘With this.’

‘And this.’ The barmaid kisses me.



Chalannabrad

So I head south for a day, mostly thinking about the craft in the sky.

And the barmaid.

By midday the next afternoon, I crest a rise in the ground and catch sight of the glittering reflection of sunlight on water. The Siltbed River, boundary between Femphrey and its troublesome neighbor, Lendleland. I think of my parents as I look upon the trail of felled trees and mired roads crossing the border, continuing to a line of distant hills beyond. I'll not chance following. These borders are fluid, but fractious so I turn back, heading north, and after two more days of hard walking reach the capital. Chalannabrad, its open, tree-lined avenues, stunning parks and monumental public buildings still quite unspoilt. The mages must have thwarted any threatening tempest. And there it is, their College. Even amongst the beauty of the city its soaring spires and sparkling crystal domes shine resplendent, variegated as the myriad labyrinthine passageways crossing its depths to conceal who knows what sorcerous secrets. I've been there often before, having completed many quests at their behest, so I am welcomed in and quickly ushered before the High Council of Sorcerers, Spellcasters and Sages. Except there is only one present, the Head of them all.

'Welcome again, Aldar Ravenwolf. Or should I say, Hero of Vastarin?'

'You have heard, my lord?'

'News travels fast, especially on such wind as we have heard blows.'

'It was tempestuous. One moment calm, the next a storm of intense magnitude.'

'From whence did it emanate?'

'I followed the trail south. It came even from Lendleland. There is something else.'

'Proceed.'

'When the clouds broke, I saw, I thought I saw some sort of craft.' He frowns. 'Where are the others, my lord?'

'In which direction did this, storm, continue?'

'It dissipated. As quickly as it formed. We are in danger.'

'Would not an adversary target our capital, rather some outlying village of no importance?'

Now I frowned. 'Why do you speak so?'

'Enough, Hero of Tannatown. The threat has come, and gone. We'll waste no more on it.'

And with that, he vanishes.

I stride away in fury and frustration past a door which suddenly opens to my side, a youthful-looking mage with neatly trimmed goatee beard stepping before me.

'Aldar,' he whispers.

It takes me a moment, but the voluminous red robes embroidered with swirling comets then come unmistakable to my recollection. 'Matteus,' I smile, 'Matteus Charmweaver. But why, where have you been?'

'I am so sorry, my friend. I can't believe he would treat you like that, after all that you have done for the College and him in the past.'

'He was rude, and not just about me. That is not his wont.'

'He's embarrassed. We all are. We know who attacked Vastarin, but we don't know how to stop him. It's Balthazar Sturm.'

'But I thought you had dealt with his sorcery.'

'The Council acted too late. By then he was experimenting with its use on machinery.'

I smile. 'But he only attacked a village, not this city. Tell me he hasn't the power to do that.'

'Come with me.' Matteus leads us to his private quarters within the College where a stone bowl stands containing water, its surface smooth and reflective like a mirror. The mage utters an incantation, staring unblinkingly into the mirror-pool. I see images swim and change within the water though I can't clearly make them out, and then the pool clears and Charmweaver looks up. 'Sturm has created a weather-altering flying machine and bound four Greater Elementals within it, to provide its power.'

'Can it be countered?'

'Not by any magic we own. To overcome these Elements, you are going to have to search in places where earth, air, fire and water are in their greatest concentrations.'

'Me?'

‘Yes, you. Sturm’s revenge will be total, not just on the College but Chalannabrad too, and the whole kingdom of Femphrey.’

‘Where must I go?’

‘Deep beneath the mountains of the Witchtooth Line. Way up on the wind-swept Howling Plains. Down under the Eelsea. And at heart of the volcano, Mount Pyre in Mauristatia.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I can offer some magical aid.’ He takes a bottle from the shelf and hands it to me. ‘Whichever Elemental you are fighting, drink this and it’ll neutralize their strength against you. But only use it in the most extreme circumstances, when all else fails.’

I note the gravity in his expression. ‘Will you join me, Matteus?’

‘I will petition the Council to work what magicks they can to lessen the impact of Sturm’s weather attacks, but it will not be enough to stop him and his craft. That will be up to you. May the gods smile upon your endeavor, Stormslayer!’

And with that I find myself standing back outside the College of Mages.

Still frustrated but smiling now, I set off towards the Witchtooth Line.

Three days walk north-east.

I hope the weather will hold.



The Witchtooth Line

I walk under an almost permanently overcast sky, green fields gradually giving way to scrubby heathland in turn becoming the foetid mire bordering Lake Eerie's mist-shrouded shores, but storm cloud not fog now masses over Eerieside, turning the day so dark I could swear it is dusk already. The villagers themselves seem anxiously expectant, all but a gathering hunting party lounging idly within the market square. As I walk past, a lean-faced man steps before me, his wolf-hound barely restrained on the chain with which he is collared. 'Careful stranger,' he growls. 'There's trouble here.'

'Of your brewing?'

'The Stormdrake has awoken, and is on the rampage!' I smile. He moves closer. 'How else do you explain this waste and weather? We're going to find its lair, destroy it and put an end to these apocalyptic storms assaulting the land. The mayor's offering reward to whoever brings back the monster's head, fire and all. You're a sword for hire. Why don't you join us? Tell you what, I'll split the takings with you fifty-fifty. What do you say?'

'Good luck with your quest.' I turn on my heel and leave town, skirting the edge of Lake Eerie, dour, unwelcoming, a forlorn curlew's cry the only sound disturbing an unnatural stillness hanging over the lake. Suddenly something black and monstrous bursts from the water in a spray of brackish wet that drenches me to the skin, a grotesque reptilian head shooting forwards on the end of a long neck. But this is another mythical creature, the fabled Eerieside Beast which with a croaking cry shoots towards me in attack. I swing Wyrmbiter from its sheath to sweep the head clean off, its lifeless body slipping back beneath the dark waters of the lake, yet I am no less relieved at the speed with which I dispatched it for now the hunter's quest seems entirely plausible and I consider returning to the market square to join him in his search for the Stormdrake. Instinct, however, pushes me on and I set off again, arriving two days later at the foothills of the Witchtooth Line which rise up gradually before me, a forbidding wall of black rock marking the mountain range separating Femphrey from the kingdom of Gallantaria to the north, its jagged peaks almost all covered permanently with snow. Heavily laden rainclouds mass above, and I think I see a black, winged shape flapping over a spot some league or more to the west. That afternoon, I reach the village of Clast which is in similar state to Vastarin, villagers looking warily at me as they go about repairing structural damage to buildings, tackling collapsed roofs, slumping walls and broken timbers. In a few minutes, I start to acquire a small following such that the headman approaches me suspiciously. Barrel-chested with a bristly red beard and muscular arms like sledgehammers, his leather apron sporting scorch marks and soot stains, his eyes narrow towards me as he speaks. 'Well, well, well, the Hero of Tannatown, in our very midst. We are honoured indeed. Now, can you help us?'

‘You’ve had quite a storm here.’

‘I’d say so. The tremors are bad enough, but the quakes have decimated our entire village.’

‘Quakes?’

‘There’s a mine, up in the hills. The Dwarfs who built it found something buried in its depths.’ He pauses. ‘A dread portal to the domain of Demons. When it opens, the earth splits apart.’

‘Then let us close it, for good.’

‘Brokk can show us the way.’

‘What of your headman? He should lead you.’

‘I’m just an ironsmith.’

‘Well, ironsmith, the Hero of Tannatown will come to your aid, but first Wyrmbiter must be sharpened at your smithy.’ We withdraw there. ‘Why don’t you come with me?’

‘I’m not going near the place. There’s evil down there. Demon, dragon, dwarf even.’

‘Come now, what of this fellow Brokk? Could he guide me?’

‘Perhaps. But he spends his days making beer. And he won’t come cheap.’ He sees my resolution. ‘Come on then, I’ll show you the way.’

He leads me from the village to a mountain valley pass. Waterfalls tumble from the surrounding peaks to form streams, one nearing a copper and stone building whose entrance is approached by an ornate stone bridge spanning another roaring cascade of water. Without hesitation I knock on the front door, wrenched open by a silver-haired dwarf with plaited white beard, wearing a beer-stained apron. ‘What do you want? Disturbing old Brokk when he’s making beer is a recipe for disaster. Didn’t you tell him, Arturo?’

‘Brokk, this is the Hero of Tannatown.’

‘What’s that?’

‘He’s a sword for hire. He’ll close the portal, but he needs a guide.’

‘There’s no portal down there. But there is something. It isn’t called Fathomdeep Mine for nothing, you know.’

‘Can you guide me?’

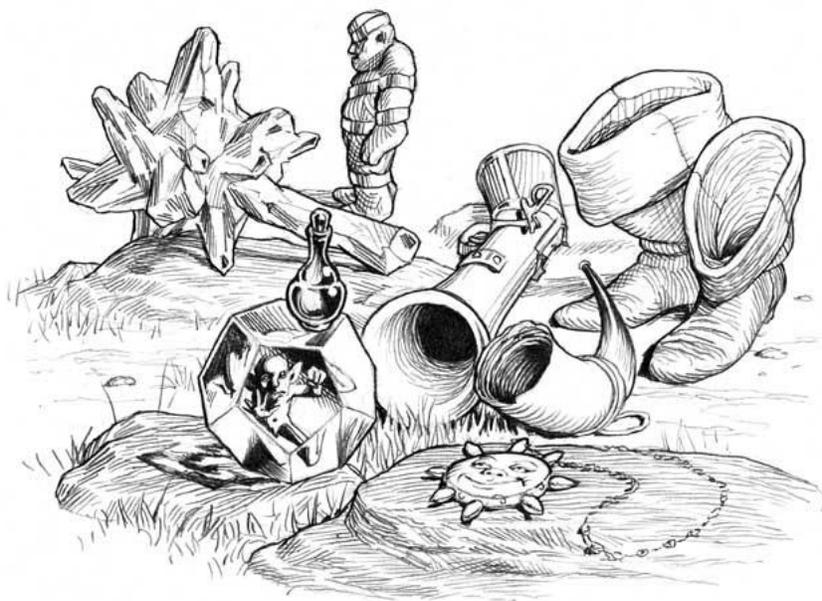
‘For sure. But he’ll have to come too.’ The ironsmith scowls. ‘No negotiation, Arturo, and no deal unless you’re in. It’ll need the three of us, I can tell you.’ Brokk ducks back inside the brewery, reappearing minutes later wearing a coat of chainmail armour, helmet with waxy stub of candle stuck to the brim, gripping a battle-axe in his ham-like fists, slung over his shoulder a coiled rope and iron grapple. ‘Look, you’re going to need to get your strength up before we head down into that mine, so why don’t you both sample one of my special ales?’ He leads us into his brewery, past huge copper cauldrons to his liquor store where a number of earthenware jars line a high shelf. I look at some of the names – Dwarf Ale; Trollbreath Beer; Skullbuster Spirit; Cadwallader’s ‘Old Battleaxe’ Cider; Wyvern’s Wing; Brokk’s Blistering Brew. I like the sound of Wyvern’s Wing whilst Arturo prefers the Blistering Brew. ‘It’s a Luck Potion,’ says Brokk as he prepares the ale for me, ‘I don’t know quite what it is about this particular one, but that’s how it works. I’ve blended my own hops with the melt-water coming down off the Witchtooth peaks and, well, see what you think.’

I take a small sip, then a large gulp. ‘It’s delicious!’

‘And it’ll keep you safe, particularly if you top it up with other potions when necessary.’

Arturo stumbles past, his flagon of Blistering Brew down to its dregs. He passes out.

Brokk shrugs. ‘He never learns, that one. He’ll be out for a good while. Looks like it’s just me and you, Hero of Tannatown.’



The Fathomdeep Mine

We approach the boarded-up entrance to the mine, struggling to read the peeling sign over the dark tunnel mouth cut into the foot of the mountain. ‘Fathomdeep,’ says Brokk prizing away planks to gain us access.

I light my lantern, slipping into the darkness to see at first headgear abandoned by the Dwarves. ‘You certainly left in a hurry.’ Brokk motions ahead to where winch systems rust along with the mine carts they pulled and the tracks on which the carts ran. ‘A real hurry.’ Water drips incessantly from the roof of the tunnel into puddles already formed between the rail sleepers.

Brokk strides ahead but I am forced to bend almost double to continue until we reach a junction where I can stand, for a moment, again. The mine-cart tracks continue into further darkness along the left-hand tunnel whilst to the right is another passageway which looks like it was constructed solely for miners making their way on foot. I look at Brokk.

‘Right,’ he says without hesitation, ‘right here, then right again down the pit shaft. That’s where we’ll find the Mole.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘Not who, what. It’s an old tunneling machine. If I can get it working, that’ll be the quickest way through the mine, and the safest too.’

‘Let’s go then.’ We follow the tunnel into dank pitch, the bobbing nimbus of my lantern quickly revealing another tunnel turning off to the right. I take it straightaway again forced to crouch in places, my annoyance giving way to wariness as I gradually become aware of a grating, scratching sound to my side. Suddenly the tunnel wall cracks and collapses into the passageway, a huge, armoured battle-like head burrowing out from the hole in the rock-face, eyeless but with monstrous mandibles sensing and clicking towards us. In the cramped space I can’t draw Wyrmbiter quickly enough, the Rock Grub upon me just as Brokk slams his battle-axe against its head, splitting the worm open so that viscous yellow blood spurts out upon us both.

‘Come on,’ he growls, the tunnel ahead ending at a descending shaft and ladder. Brokk climbs down and I follow, to emerge in a larger Dwarf-made cavern almost wholly occupied by a contraption made of wood and metal, with large spiked wheels, caterpillar tracks and a massive drilling head at its prow. Brokk waves a hand at the incredible device. ‘Meet the Mole,’ he says proudly, ‘the most marvelous tunneling machine this side of the Witchtooth Line.’

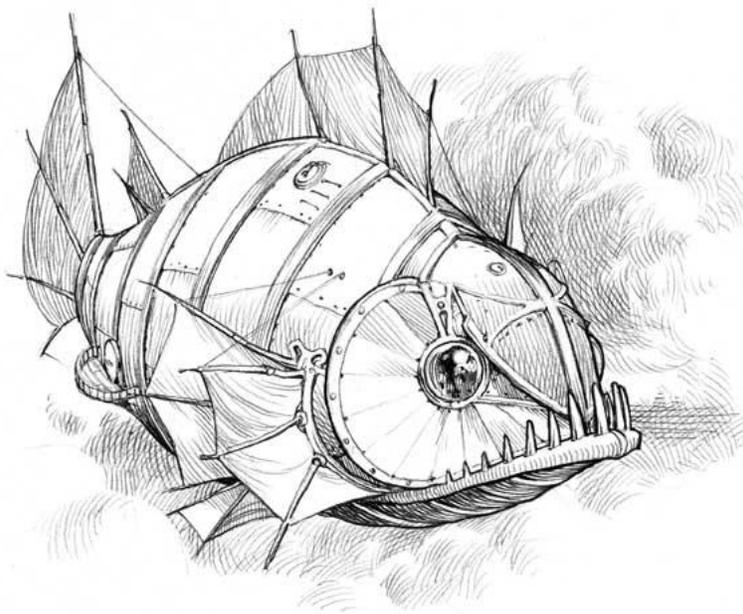
‘It’s rusting heavily. Are you sure it’ll work?’

‘Only one way to find out.’ He taps the machine several times with his battle-axe before climbing up into the tunneller’s cockpit, pulling at levers and punching buttons on a brass panel in front of him. With a throaty roar, the Mole’s engine springs into life. ‘Just as I hoped,’ he chuckles, ‘there’s still some juice left in the glowstones after all. Come on, we’ll make it to the deepest part of the mine in no time now.’ I hop aboard as he tugs at another lever then grips the steering control in his calloused hands. He looks at me, his eyes aglow with excitement. ‘Here goes nothing!’ he cries pushing a wooden paddle on the floor with his feet. And then we are off, the Mole rattling and clanking as Brokk steers it right towards a wall of solid rock, the drill-head screeching to top speed then with a grinding roar connecting with the rock-face. It chews through with ease and I sit back in relief as Brokk directs the tunneling machine through the earth, heading deeper and deeper into the mine. Eventually, the mass of mud and earth in front of the machine collapses and with a whirring scream the drill-bit hits empty air. We are in a large natural chamber deep below the mountain. As the machine powers down, we climb out of the cockpit to find ourselves on one side of a cathedral-like cavern. To the left, a waterfall cascades into a chill lake whilst on the far side I can make out an ominously dark fissure, perhaps leading to caves beyond. Glowstones set into the walls and phosphorescent lichen covering the water-worn cave illuminate discarded machinery, from piles of ironpit-props to experimental digging machines. I gulp when I realise it has been deliberately wrecked. Brokk points with his axe towards the fissure. ‘What you’re seeking,’ he says grimly, ‘lies through there. I’ll wait for you here, but I’ll go no further. The place is cursed.’

I study his demeanour then head along the line his axe still points towards, entering the cave network and quickly following a low-roofed cleft which heads downwards again, opening out into a broad cavern whose roof appears to be supported by nothing but a few menhir-sized boulders. A pool of crystal-clear water has collected within a natural bowl in the rock, which sparkles and glitters with a rainbow of mineral deposits. I pause, then take a drink feeling instantly refreshed and reinvigorated, entering another tunnel which twists and turns before finally opening out into a large chamber, the arch of a natural stone bridge spanning its centre, its floor lined with the upward pointing spears of ancient stalagmites dropping away below. The only way onward is over the bridge but as I start to cross it my ears are assailed by a high-pitched, high-speed clicking noise and two Giant Bats swoop down from their roost in attack. I race across the bridge, ducking into another sloping passageway giving access to further cave, this one circular and strewn with massive boulders. Crystalline seams within the walls sparkle with phosphorescence, strange light-emitting minerals bathing the cavern in an eerie, milky light.

In the middle of this chamber, resting on a plinth of rock is a crude clay figurine no more than thirty centimetres tall and bound with bands of green copper. I look more closely to read carved into the bands, ‘Break the bonds that bind me.’ I pause, then prize the copper bands open with the tip of Wyrmbiter. The floor begins to shake beneath my feet, the statue itself vibrating in my hand, cracking open, transforming, swelling to the size of a man and more, a massive stone giant, its hide formed from great slabs of rock. The tremors increase, pieces of rock breaking from the

roof to crash down around me. As I back away, the Elemental continues to manifest, two huge hands with fingers like spears of rock grasping the cave mouth and tearing the fissure open, raising its fists in anger and bellowing its fury to the world, causing more rocks to tumble down and splash into the lake. But the Elemental's roar is then drowned out by that of something greater. I spin round to see the Mole powering towards us, Brokk at the controls, his features set in a grimace of intense concentration as he steers the machine towards the Earth Elemental, the drill-bit screaming up to speed. And then the two behemoths collide, the Mole's drill tearing a massive hole in the Elemental's side. Roaring in pain, the giant grabs hold of the tunneling machine in one hand and flings it at the wall of the chamber. The machine explodes in a cloud of wooden splinters and metal components, Brokk thrown from the wreckage to land limp on the ground. With new determination I fight the creature, almost immediately knocked unconscious by the sledgehammer blow of its smashing me with those massive stone fists. As I draw Wyrmbiter, it picks me up with one hand and throws me against the side of the cavern where Brokk is still lying inanimate. It is then I remember the potion Matteus gave me, but in reaching for it I see the Elemental stamp its foot, opening a yawning pit in the ground right beside me. The potion tips from me towards the hole. I reach for the nearest object to pull it towards me, feeling Brokk's battle-axe, and in one motion I grab the weapon, swinging it without hesitation to smash the Elemental to pieces. The creature disintegrates to rubble on the floor. I check Brokk. He is dead, but I can't wait because the mined-out tunnels continue to fall in on themselves. I snatch the potion from the edge of the pit and race back through the passages and chambers as quickly as I can, exhausted and gasping for breath, lurching from the mine into daylight and blinking against its sudden harsh glare. I collapse to the floor as a cloud of dust escapes from the entrance behind me. Fathomdeep Mine, with my friend inside, has been sealed for good.



The Howling Plains

A day's walk after leaving the foothills of the Witchtooth Line I come within sight of Tannatown. Just the sight of the place is enough to spur me on and the town's inhabitants cheer and call to their neighbours as I walk past, a crowd of children soon scampering at my heels to where the Mayor himself is ready to meet me. 'Aldar,' he smiles warmly, 'welcome back. Another fight, eh?'

'Something like that.'

'Stop and rest a while. You must have more battles ahead.'

I smile in turn, happy for the chance to recuperate. And that I do, for during the rest of the day I am treated like a king. Healers tend my wounds, a notable physician plies me with restorative elixirs, the local blacksmith (who reminds me of Arturo) makes repairs to my armour, and that night I am guest of honour at a great feast, sleeping off the delicious food in the finest hostelry in town. The next morning, I set off early to avoid the crowds, three days later finding myself in the baking scrub which becomes the dusty desolation of the Howling Plains. To the south of Femphrey, beyond the expanses of fertile farmland, the plains form something of a barren no man's land between this kingdom and Lendleland, parched, desolate scrub home to wild animals and tribes of war-like Birdmen. I look behind to the rolling hills and lush green fields of my homeland then gaze again southwards, the beating sun masking the fact that the sky is coloured a dirty yellow. I feel breeze on my face which soon becomes wind, raging, powerful, the dusty sky resolving itself into sandstorm with a dancing silhouette blown before it - a huge balloon stitched together from sheets of sailcloth with wicker basket hanging beneath and desperate shouts coming from its pilot as he tries to escape. The first stinging wave of sand particles hit me just as an evil-looking face appears within the whirling cyclone of dust and sand, its mouth open wide to swallow the balloon and its terrified occupant. I draw Wyrmbiter, the sword quickly glowing with its own esoteric energies as arms reach out from the cyclone, huge hands all composed from abrasive sand and grit. Having no idea how to combat such monstrosity, I leap forward but am swept from my feet straightaway as the Sand Elemental lifts me up on a spiralling column of air before hurling me back to the ground. I try to stand firm but am sand-blasted as the creature hurls itself against me bombarding my body with abrasive grit then reaching out again to hit me with its sandpaper, rough fists. Sensing my opportunity, I swing Wyrmbiter hard and cut both its hands clean off! Dust and sound suddenly dissipate on the wind. The balloon touches down and I race over to check on its occupant, a swarthy-skinned man who pushes a pair of goggles onto his forehead, brushing the sand from his vast robes. 'Thank you so much! I was in real trouble there. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that you saved Corbo Rundum's life. However can I repay you?'

'You can tell me how you came to be pursued by a Sand Elemental.'

‘I’m from Quartz, a village to the east. Terrible drought is affecting our farmlands and if we don’t get some rain soon, the harvest will fail. Clouds were actually in the sky when some of our farmers thought they saw a big shining object drawing the weather away towards itself.’

‘A fish. Did it look like a fish?’

‘I was intrigued, I’m an inventor of sorts, so I set off in my balloon to see what I could discover. Halfway across the Howling Plains and that evil sandstorm suddenly rose to chase me all the way back here.’

‘What now, Corbo?’

‘I’ll head back to Quartz I think, or perhaps to Chalannabrad, to petition the College of Mages for information.’

‘I’ve already been to them. It’s an old pupil of theirs. I’m trying to fight him. What is it?’

‘These plains. They’re dangerous. There are Birdmen.’

‘I know.’

‘You’ll need a guide.’

‘You want to come with me?’

He bows.

‘Very well.’

We journey south the next day, no signs of life but a distant circling of carrion birds. That night, we spend under the stars. ‘The Mages really can’t stop this, pupil?’

‘They were terrified. Well, the one I spoke to anyway.’

‘And you?’

‘This place. My parents were killed here. I couldn’t protect them.’

‘You are guarding me. Tomorrow we reach the Screaming Canyon. And well is it named for the scouring winds of the plains whistle through its maze-like chasms as though demons themselves dwelt there.’

I think of Arturo. And Brokk. Then we sleep. Not long after dawn, we come across a massive fracture stretching as far as we can see across the parched plain. The Screaming Canyon. There is parting of the ways between the towering cliffs, the sun beating down as we make our way along

the gorge. To our left comes a disconcerting wailing sound, to our right birds rising on the thermals rising from sun-baked ravines. Corbo leads us left. A long way off, I can just make out a towering stack of wind-sculpted rock rising many metres into the sky above the cliffs of the canyon. 'That's where we need to be heading,' he points. The path splits again. We make our way through winding canyon, cliffs beginning to close in above until it is almost as though we are making our way through a tunnel in the rock. 'Be careful. And quiet.' We emerge at the base of an imposing stack of sand-scoured and wind-carved rock rising vertically from the valley floor with columns of narrow ledges, treacherous overhangs and sheer rock faces. 'Up there.' We begin our ascent. Halfway up, Corbo suddenly misses his step and falls, his body breaking upon the hard rock floor far below. Descending as quickly as possible, I check on my companion, but he is dead, gone, just as quickly as Brokk went in Fathomdeep Mine though this time it is my fault for no Elemental has slain him. Sudden movement to my side distracts me. Birdmen, two of them advancing. They couldn't have picked a worse time for themselves. I am upon them straightaway slashing them to pieces with Wyrmbiter, Brokk's battle axe crushing whatever's left. Breathing hard, I look upon Corbo once more, then climb back up pressing on to the top to find myself standing before a natural archway in the face of the stack, passing through cautiously to enter a domed space within the rock itself. The wind blows in, whistling round a worn set of steps that appear to have been carved from the rock itself, themselves leading to a dais of red sandstone. Standing there is a robed figure, its hooded cloak billowing and flapping in the wind, the cowl hiding its face completely though a woman's voice carries on the wind, barely more than a breathy whisper.

'What do you want with the Keeper of the Four Winds?'

'I come seeking aid.'

'Others, blown here by the winds of fate, have in their time sought help, but few earn the right to receive it.'

'How do I gain such favour?'

'Answer me this – seven sovereigns have sought my aid, and each sovereign sent seven sages, seven times, each sage accompanied by seven scholars. Tell me, how many have sought my help?'

I think hard, then smile. 'Seven.'

'That is correct. Now, how may I help you?'

'A mad weather-mage has bound four Elementals to his flying machine wreaking havoc with the skies. How may I stop him?'

‘Ah, yes,’ she murmurs, ‘I have heard of this errant wizard. He has gained magical supremacy over the elements and has the north wind, Boreas, at his bidding. To counter the threat he poses, I give you temporary command of his brother, the west wind, Zephyrus. You need only intone his name to summon him, but you may only do so once. So choose the moment wisely. And now you must be about your quest.’ The keeper raises an arm and points it straight at me, a spiraling vortex of air picking me up and gently carrying me backwards through the natural arch to the sandy floor of the canyon. I think of Corbo. And now I know I must search the sea.



The Eelsea

After two days travel, I settle down for the night in a small wood. When I wake in the morning, something tells me I have been fortunate to avoid disturbance, so thanking the some time favour of Sukh I travel northwest for two more days until the walls of the capital come into view on the horizon. Chalannabrad. And still no sign of a storm. I'm going to need some way of breathing underwater, and a ship to take me out to sea, so I head first to the Academy of Naval Sorcerers which is affiliated to the College of Mages. I'm just thinking about Brokk when I pass a market stall selling potions. I buy one of Luck, the stallholder throwing in a pair of Seven League Boots too though what use they'll do me I have no idea. Soon after, I arrive at the Academy which is bustling with activity. Most of the mages are selling equipment but one wizard seems to be offering just himself. 'Prospero,' he smiles as I pass, 'Prospero Seacharmer. How may I help you?'

'You're not selling any goods.'

'Oh, yes I am. Me.'

'I don't understand.'

'Where are you heading?'

'The Eelsea.'

'For 10 Gold Pieces I'll travel with you and cast spell when you want to descend below the waves. You breathe underwater, and I stay dry looking after matters on deck.' I smile, accepting his offer. As we approach the docks, we see a forest of masts over the rooftops of the buildings which surround the city's grand harbour. The docks themselves are full to overflowing with all manner of ships, merchant galley slavers to freebooter galleons, all vessels in the harbour with not so much as a schooner out at sea beyond the grand harbour wall. Prospero shrugs. 'It's the storms. There are more of them, and they're getting worse, threatening the seaways. Reports of Great Eel attacks are on the increase too. I know someone who'll take us out though.' He leads me straight towards a lady buccaneer, dressed in practical leather trows, a fine embroidered jerkin with scimitar hanging from her sword belt, luxurious long, black hair tied back in a ponytail with ribbons of Khulian silk, a patch covering the orbit of her left eye.

'Captain Katarina,' she grins, 'Prospero's told me of your quest. I know the place you seek, and I'll take you there too. All I ask in return is half of whatever you bring back from the bottom.' I promise her so. We set sail with the tide. On the second day, thick fog blows up from nowhere moving towards the ship with sinister purpose until its sickly yellow, cloud-like mass threatens to engulf the *Tempest*. I can feel Wyrmbiter vibrating in its scabbard at my side. 'I've not seen

the like before,' says the captain, 'that's no natural sea mist. There's sorcery at work here, I'd swear it.' Prospero holds my arm, moving us to the prow of the ship where he raises his hands in face of the approaching fog. Malevolent features form within the roiling mist, a pained expression contorting Prospero's face as he battles the sorcery controlling the Fog Elemental. And then the battle is won, the fog is gone, leaving the *Tempest* free to continue its journey across the sea.

That night I lie in bed unable to sleep, rising the following morning to glowering, overcast skies.

There is no land in sight, but the *Tempest* is at anchor. 'Is this the place?'

'Not quite X marks the spot I'll grant you, but this is it. We're anchored at the edge of Blackcoral Reef.'

'The Devilfish Rift,' I say glancing into the water, 'Temple of Hydana. Is it really down there?'

'Rumour has it there was an island here once until it was drowned by a tidal wave. Others believe the temple has always been underwater. Whatever the truth, if there's anything that can help you gain mastery over a Greater Water Elemental, it'll be down there where the God of the Sea once lived.'

I step up to the gunwale, remove my backpack and motion to Prospero.

'Take off your boots,' he instructs.

'But I just bought them.' Nevertheless, I take them off.

He stretches his arms towards me, begins to cast his spell and then suddenly I am gasping for air, unable to breathe. In panic, I put my hands to my neck and feel gills behind my ears. My fingers are webbed. And so are my feet! Still gasping for air, I run to the side of the ship craving the cold, wet embrace of the sea. Stepping out onto the gangplank, I leap off the end dropping like a stone as the waves close over my head, the weight of my armour and sword dragging me down to the submerged reef. My lungs begin to ache until unable to fight the urge any longer I take a gulping breath. And it works! Prospero's spell has worked. Moments later my feet touch the seabed and I look around. Sunlight penetrating the water at these depths is muted but as my eyes grow accustomed to the reduced light levels I find I can see well enough. Behind me the reef rises back up towards the surface and I can see the underside of the ship's hull above me. Several metres ahead is the edge of the continental shelf beyond which lies nothing but the gloom of the ocean depths.

To my right, I can make out the holed wreck of a galleon while to the left the seabed is riven by a great fissure. I head towards the latter, soon standing over its edge to peer down through deepening gloom into the rift, just making out the bottom where it opens out like a valley onto

another level of the sea floor. I descend, the surrounding light levels lowering still further until I see everything through a twilight gloom, formless stygian shapes, one of these dark silhouettes turning out to be the carcass of a huge Bullwhale, half of it already consumed. I push on to find the temple, progressing further into the rift as the encroaching gloom increases. At the edge of another underwater precipice, the continental shelf drops away into pitch darkness. I look left to see a fallen column only to hear rumbling beneath my feet, a disturbance in the water as a cross between monstrous crustacean and giant octopus pulls itself up onto the shelf with coiling tentacles and drags itself towards me, two huge pincer-claws snapping menacingly, a watery eye watching me intently. I draw Wyrmbiter to face the Abyssal Horror but my sword is slow in the water and the beast grabs me with a rubbery tentacle, biting down hard with its snapping beak.

I flail helplessly, somehow escaping to wave my weapon, yet again Wyrmbiter struggles in the water and the monster moves to strike me with one of its snapping pincers. Somehow, this time, the sword moves a little quicker and I manage to slice through not one but both of its arms sending the Horror reeling back down into oblivion. The Sunken Temple lies ahead, its grand pillared entrance supporting a pediment carved with mermen riding seahorses fighting many-tentacled horrors. A Grand cupola dome projects from the roof. At heart of the temple beneath this golden cupola inlaid with bejeweled tesserae stands an imposing statue of the Sea God himself, made from jade depicting Hydana as a four metre tall fishman with tail, scaly skin, torso and arms of a man, his face somewhere between the two, holding a golden trident. On a plinth in front of the statue is an innocuous seeming sea-shell which I take without thought. There is a sudden commotion in the water, three figures appearing in front of the statue, like women but formed from the seawater themselves. They watch me intently with eyes that glimmer like mother of pearl and when they speak I hear them inside my mind. ‘Who dares profane the temple of Hydana?’

‘Why do you defile this sacred place?’

‘Speak now or forfeit your life to the Sea God.’

‘I come only seeking his aid, in the fight against evil. The rogue mage Balthazar Sturm works to control the very weather of the Old World.’

‘We have no interest in the problems of ‘dry ones’.

‘You are Naiads, daughters of the ocean, elemental creatures yourselves. Sturm’s meddling with the climate will affect the seas too.’

Silence. ‘We appreciate your need.’

‘And, as you come penitent, seeking our father’s aid...’

‘...we will give you the shell of the seas.’ They dissolve back into the sea, their parting farewell in my mind, ‘May Hydana smile on your enterprise.’

And with that, my head suddenly breaks the surface of the water. I can breathe normally. I am helped back onto the *Tempest*. ‘Did you find what you were looking for then?’ presses the captain. ‘Did the sea give up its bounty? What treasures did you recover from the ocean depths?’ I hold the shell up before me. ‘Call yourself an adventurer? But don’t worry. I’m not going to throw you overboard or anything like that. Let’s just get back to land before bad weather overtakes us.’ After a day’s sail we reach the docks and the wizard and I take leave of the Captain.

‘Thanks, Prospero.’

‘Where to now?’

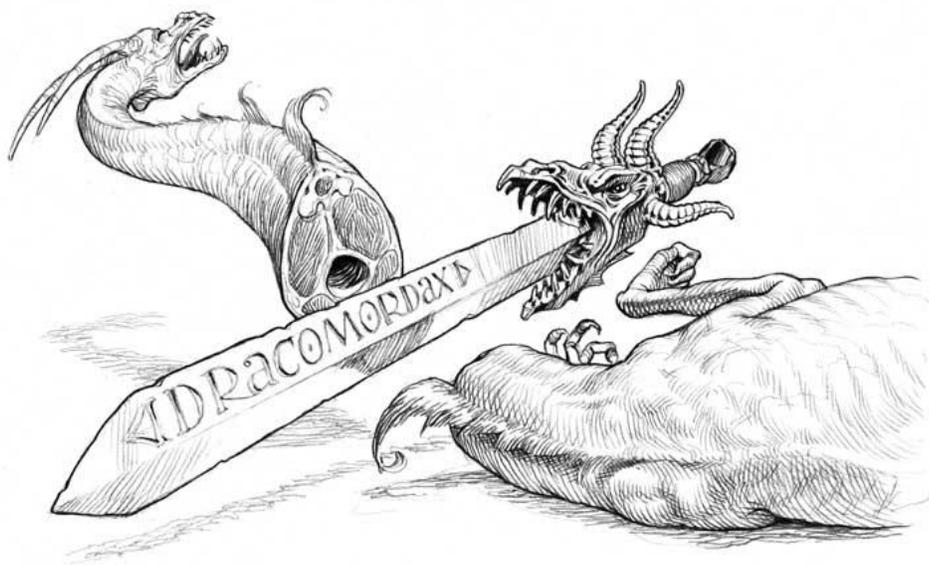
‘Mount Pyre. But it’s going to take me an age to get there.’

‘That shell, put it to your ear.’

I listen, hearing the distant susurrations as of the ebb and flow of the tide, waves breaking on shore. And a name being whispered: ‘Oceanus.’

I look at Prospero who smiles. ‘Now put your boots on. Where to, again?’

‘Mount Pyre, but...’ I see Prospero wave his hands and then I am off...



Mount Pyre

...towns, villages, forests and fields hurtling past in a blur as I cross rivers in a single bound, barely breaking my stride. And so I come in sight of Lake Cauldron, Crystal Lake, and as dusk falls see the twinkling lights of Shard Wharf ahead. I am still some days' travel from Mount Pyre further east, and wonder why the boots stopped me here. Soon I find a barge owner called Koll who with his wife and son are making passage taking spices to sell in the market towns of Bathoria. We travel along the River of Fire. 'What news abroad in the world, Koll?'

'Turmoil, my dear adventurer. Colleagues tell me that the south-west is suffering terrible floods at the moment.' I think of Corbo and hope his territories see something of these rains. Koll leans in close. 'There is even talk of the mythical stormdrake having taken to the skies once again. Why do you smile?'

'I think of the past, that is all.'

We part company the next day and I proceed on foot, soon scrambling up the black, volcanic slopes of Mount Pyre, higher and higher towards its summit. The terrain gets rougher and I have to scramble through a landscape of black rocks and steaming volcanic rents, sulphurous steam from holes in the ground which feels warm beneath my feet. Far above, from the smoke-belching crater of Mount Pyre a column of soot and ash continually rises high into the sky. As I round the side of a monolithic boulder, an incongruous carved archway of black rock set into the side of the volcanic peak marks entrance to the Fire Tunnels. I pass beneath the stone arch into a long passageway, looking as though it has been gnawed through the rock by some massive burrowing beetle. The walls glow with ambient heat, flames breaking forth from rocks strewn sides of the tunnel, lighting the way ahead. It twists and turns until I reach a T-junction where it joins another curving pathway, the tunnel sloping downwards at steep gradient, curving round to the left to meet another junction with new passageway leading off to the right. This new path ends at another T-junction where I feel the dry air of the Fire Tunnels getting hotter. I turn left to see a narrow, natural rock bridge spanning a crawling lava flow far below, the heat now unbearable as I spot on the other side of this crevasse another carved, black stone archway opening to further tunnel. I proceed with caution over the bridge, hearing an ominous crack and feeling the rock shifting beneath me. I run, still several metres from the end of the bridge when it gives way altogether. With herculean effort, I fling myself forwards grasping and grabbing at new ground, standing to follow twists and turns towards yet another T-junction, descending again along a pathway pulsing with suffused orange glow. Suddenly blazing light bursts towards me and two ethereal figures hover in its middle, burning human skeletons clothed in bodies of scintillating flame. The Bone-Fires shriek wildly as they hurtle towards me, the fingers of their burning hands outstretched to grab and tear my flesh. I swing Wyrmbiter desperately, slashing away their tips, the blackened bones of these ghost adventurers turning to ash, their fires snuffed out for good.

I reach another junction where a new tunnel branches off from the main passageway at right angle, ending at the lava river I crossed earlier. I follow this new branch, the air ahead starting to cloud with thick, yellow smoke, a nose-curling smell of rotten eggs forcing me to take a deep breath. But I can't hold long enough and have to take a lungful of noisome smoke. Coughing heavily, I pass out of the gas cloud to see steps hewn from the rock leading down into the heart of the volcano. In a vast chamber, stairs ending on a spur of black rock jut out over the seething lake of boiling magma. I approach an altar-like plinth of black rock standing at the end of the spur, six curiously-shaped holes carved into its top. The volcano surges violently, a column of flame shooting 20 metres into the cooked air of the chamber. I recoil, throwing my arms up to shield myself from the incandescent flames, squinting against blistering light as I see a jet of flame widen to take on humanoid shape - a Fire Elemental, genie of flame, its voice blazing like the roar of conflagration. 'Who dares desecrate this sanctuary of the Fire God?' it flames, its hot breath in my face.

'I am Aldar Ravenwolf, braving the perils of Mount Pyre to reach your sacred shrine. I seek aid in my quest.'

'You have the audacity to ask assistance from me, a true servant of the Burning One? You will pay for such with your worthless life.' It roars towards me, though in one moment I take the potion I bought from the stallholder, drain it and the Fire Elemental vanishes in an explosion of incandescent flame.

Magma boils, throwing out giant splashes of molten rock, the level of the lava lake rising until it is lapping at sides of the spur. I turn back to the two flights of stone steps. With a cacophonous groaning crash the left-hand one splinters and topples into rising lava. I take the right-hand stairs two at a time, sprinting along the ruddy-walled tunnel to a junction where I turn left, running through the cloud of venting, sulphurous gas to another junction, right as the tunnel walls rumble and heave, up a steep incline, unbearable heat with flames of lava licking at my heels. At the next junction, I go straight on and continue to ascend into a spectacular cavern with huge, crystalline growths sparkling with rainbow of colours, the chamber shaking apart as the volcano itself starts to erupt, a crystalline structure the size of standing stones crashing down from roof in front of me. A giant slab of quartz breaks free of the ceiling and smashes into the wall of the cavern, daylight flooding the crystal cave as a gaping hole appears in the side of the volcano. I sprint for the opening, hurtling through the rent in the cavern wall, tripping and rolling head first down the side of the volcano, bowling down the mountainside as Mount Pyre erupts with fury. I skin my knees and elbows on the rocky ground, a petrified stump of burnt tree breaking my fall. I scramble to my feet and keep running, exhaustion threatening to overwhelm me. The wind is picking up, storm clouds massing overhead and there in the darkening sky, that brass fish. The wind strengthens to a gale and I struggle to stand, debris picked up by the whirlwind forming around me, rocks, branches, even a cow and then the whirling vortex plucks me from the ground and I'm hurtling skyward, higher until I am over the flying machine...

The Eye of the Storm

...suddenly the wind drops, gravity returns, and I drop through the air desperately throwing a hand out to grab hold of its metal balcony rail. I crash into the side of the vessel, pulling myself up and over, looking down to see the whirling maelstrom rotate beneath the giant brass fish. The vessel is huge, bigger than the Bullwhale in the Eelsee, its sparkling glass eyes large, observation windows in front, steering sails and a vast rudder at rear. In its side is a round access hatch. I grasp the wheeled-handle, turn, open and enter *The Eye of the Storm*. The hatch slams shut behind me, a clang echoing through the metal interior of this peculiar vessel. I make my way along a grilled walkway into the craft and stop at a central stairwell where cast iron spiral stairs lead up and down through holes in the floor and ceiling. I am on the bottom deck. Stairs lead down to the bilges where I hear water sloshing and up two decks above this one. I climb to the middle deck where I see two steel doors, one to aft, one to fore, opening the latter and coming face to face with a hulking, mechanical giant crafted from inter-locking steel plates, its eyes glowing crystals and on its chest plate – *Juggernaut*. It is guarding another room on the other side of the chamber. The door slams shut behind me and the lumbering colossus strides my way on pistoning legs, steam boiling into the air from the sides of its head, its lantern-eyes blazing white-hot as it moves like some terrible, walking siege engine. But there is error in its step, a gap through which I slip, grasping the handle of the door in front and stepping through onto the bridge of the ship, slamming it closed behind me. On the far side, a split-level chamber takes on curved prow, two massive crystal observation domes making up most of the fore section giving the bridge unprecedented views of the kingdom below. Banks of machinery line the walls tended by bizarre-looking creatures, dwarf-sized clad in scaled suits of stitched leather with all-enveloping brass helmets, dazzling blue sparks of lightning flickering behind their goggle-eyes.

They are Fulgurites, and they ignore me. A network of pipes from the banks of machinery converges at a central control console which protrudes from a raised metal platform jutting out over the floor of the chamber. And there stands a tall, bald-headed man wearing a robe of ever-changing hues, his cloak turning rich ultramarine with storm clouds sweeping across the back of it, the next moment orange and sunbursts blooming across the cloth. He turns and fixes me with a furious glare, clicks his fingers and bursts into flames which consume his body as his flesh becomes liquid fire. The Human Torch reaches for me with tongues of flame, but I find and drain Charmweaver's potion and straightway he staggers back as blackened cinder, transforming, starting to grow, his skin hardening so that he becomes a three metre tall behemoth of earth and stone, his roar like a crashing landslide. I hold the conch shell above my head. 'Oceanus! Aid me now!' With a rushing roar, water pours from the shell in an impossible torrent, rapidly filling the chamber. The electrical equipment shorts out, sweeping the Fulgurites from their stations, the water surging together rising from the floor of the bridge in a great column gaining crude arms and a face. Oceanus, Spirit of the Sea, crashes into Sturm's body like waves breaking on a rocky

shoreline, the two watery creatures crashing and surging around the bridge dousing me and sweeping me of my feet. The Colossus bellows in rage, but the tidal attacks of the Water Elemental are now washing his body away, huge pieces of his clay-like form breaking off to dissolve in the water, evaporating, disappearing just as howling gale assaults the bridge, pushed back by the force of raging wind, a cruelly smiling face appearing within the whirlwind – Balthazar Sturm! An explosion of blinding white light accompanied by clap of thunder hurls me backwards into the bank of machinery. The Weather Mage is suspended in mid-air above the platform, his robe deep blue, almost black, flashes of lightning skittering across the fabric.

An arrogant grimace, the power of the storm burns in his eyes. He stretches his arms out and bursts of lightning arc between his hands, sending searing bolt of lightning into the deck plating at my feet. Then he swoops down. Another huge explosion rocks the bridge throwing me to the ground, blowing out the observation window-eyes of the fish in a hail of razor-sharp crystal shards. I grab hold of the handrail. Sturm disbelieving, drops to the platform even as to his horror it starts to break away. He is sucked out of the front of the ship, his face terrified as he drops like a stone through the churning clouds, arms and legs flailing. As the scream of rending metal bolts holding the handrail to the wall shears through, I hurtle through the shattered eyes of the fish after him. ‘Zephyrus!’ I scream as I plunge through the storm-clouds. Over the rush of wind in my ear I hear a hurricane roar and then I am being supported on a cushion of air, carried in the gale-strong arms of an Air Elemental.

‘You called and I have come,’ manifestation of the west wind booms. ‘Command and I shall obey!’

‘Take me back to Vastarin!’ I scream at the top of my voice, ‘to *The Traveller’s Rest* tavern!’

Hero of Tannatown. Saviour of Femphrey. Stormslayer!!

