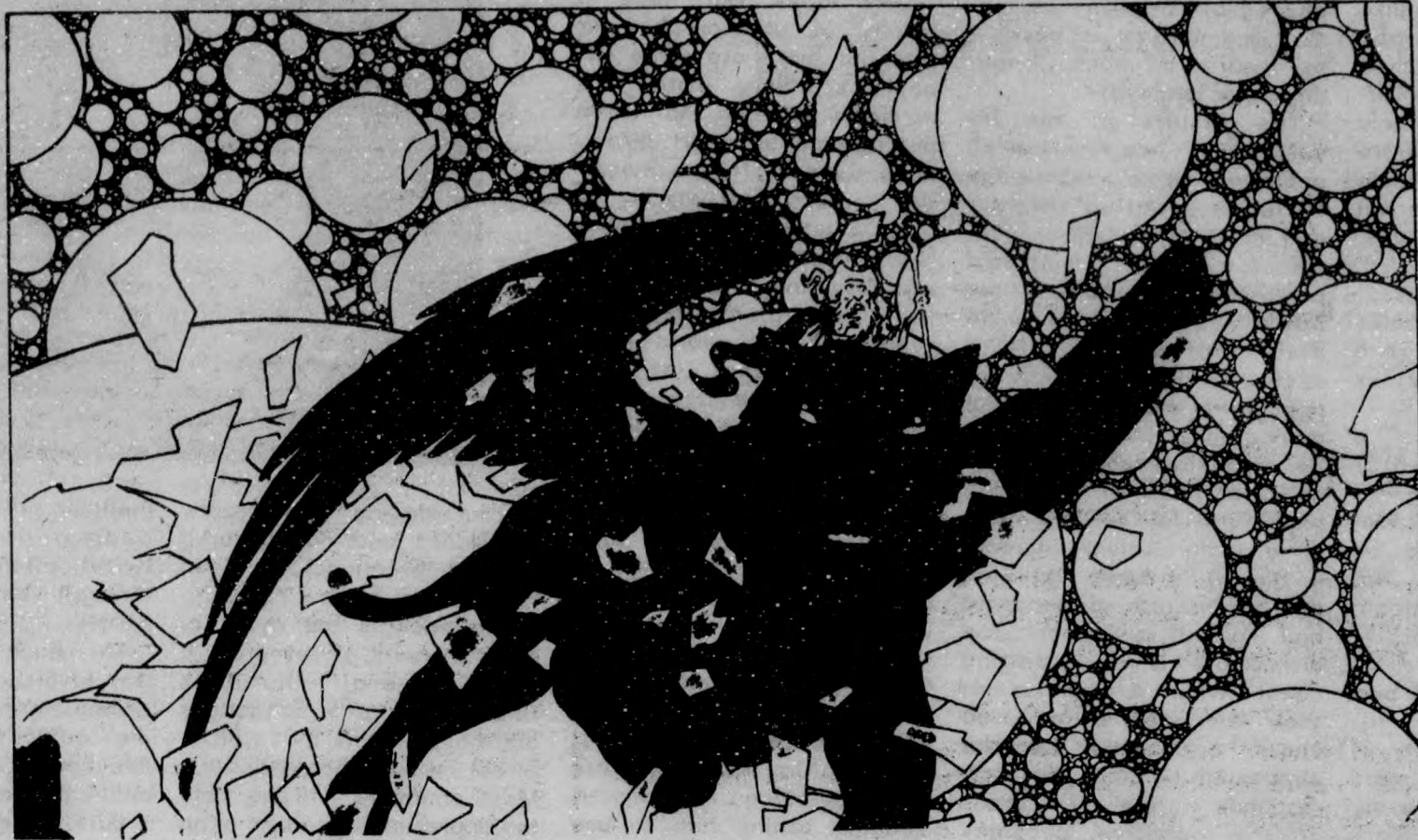


Quest for The Crown of Trent
Chapter 5

Enter The Realm of Drak



By MIKE MACKINNON

Summary: So far in the story of Jar and his search for the lost Crown of Trent we have seen Jar and his two companions fight with the Plain-Wraiths. In that battle Jar suffered a wound and was forced to journey to the northern regions of the Haln Plain. There, through the help of the Shaman, he travelled the branches of the time tree and his wound was healed. Before leaving the company of the old healer, Jar is presented with a talisman, the Amulet of Drak.

The amulet felt heavy laying against his chest but Jar tried to force his thoughts away from it. The words of the Shaman came back to him and caused a shiver to travel up his spine. He knew the consequence of using the amulet in the absence of evil but still the temptation was strong. The only way he could fight the temptation was to think of his two companions. They too would suffer if the talisman was misused.

A heavy silence hung over Jar and his two friends. It was if Althar and Tran were aware of the struggle going on within Jar's mind. Both men knew that Jar was a strong warrior but wondered if he might find the seductive power of the amulet too much. A quick glance in his direction confirmed their suspicions - the talisman was already working its spell.

As they rode, dark, heavy rain clouds gathered overhead. Jar hoped that they

would be able to make it to the Haln Forest before the rain started but he knew their chance was slim. There was still another half day's riding yet before reaching its shelter and the skies looked as if they were about to break open any second. As if on cue a clap of thunder sounded in the distance and the rain started. The quickness of the storm's start caught Jar and his companions off guard. Hurriedly, he reached into the pack behind himself and pulled out a poncho. As he pulled it over his head he noticed the others doing the same.

The rain came down in sheets reducing visibility to zero. Jar was forced to slow the pace to a near crawl. He cursed at his misfortune. As he did so he noticed that the amulet, which had felt cool against his skin, now glowed with an unnatural warmth. Was there some connection between this storm and the medallion? The possibility seemed very likely to Jar. He decided to keep his thoughts to himself. There was no point in worrying his friends needlessly. Besides, the amulet was his burden.

Jar could hear cursing coming from the direction of Tran. He turned and peered through the rain and was just able to make out the shape of the dwarf. He appeared to be struggling with something that Jar assumed to be his poncho. Tran had never been too adept

at putting the thing on. Jar turned his attention back to

watching the progress of his mount. As he turned a dark birdlike shape swooped out of the rain at him nearly knocking him from his horse. He struggled to stay on and turned to see what it was that had attacked him. He did so just in time to see the creature come at him again. This time he was prepared and was able to avoid being hit.

Similar creatures were attacking Tran and Althar also. Tran had actually been the first one attacked. It was one of the attackers that he had been struggling with when Jar had first heard him curse. The second dive of the assailant knocked him from his mount. As he hit the wet ground he rolled and just avoided being raked by the talons of the giant bird. He drew his sword and when the attack came again he was prepared. The bird dove in and was pierced through the breast by the sword. Its momentum carried it forward and into Tran. Tran growled a curse as he hit the ground once again.

Jar, in the meantime had dismounted after seeing the fate of Tran. With his sword held at the ready he awaited the next attack. Facing the way the bird had disappeared he was unprepared for what happened next. Instead of following the pattern of previous attacks the bird had circled and now came from behind. Jar was totally unaware of the danger from the rear until the attack came. The force of the creature's impact boled him over and pain shot through his back and next his back was racked by sharp

talons. Jar hoped that there was no poison on the bird's talons or even dirt. The last thing he needed now was another delay, something that would certainly result if an infection set in.

Althar was being attacked by two of the creatures. They would swoop in simultaneously and all he could do was duck. There was no way he could defend against one without being hit by the other. As they came in for another dive Althar came up with a desperate plan. He held his ground and tried to keep an eye on both of the birds. This he was able to do by standing sideways. He remained standing for as long as possible. Just when it seemed certain that he was going to be hit he dropped to the ground. The two birds made a desperate effort to avoid each other but the elf's timing had been perfect. He watched from the ground as the two hit with a resounding thump. He rolled aside as they crashed into the ground next to where he had been laying.

The rain had been coming down in sheets but now the wind picked up. This caused the rain to swirl around. It was whipped into the face of the three companions, making defending themselves even more difficult. Jar's hair hung over his face in long, wet clumps, the water dripping over his brows. He swiped it back with a quick flick of his hand and looked for the next attack. As he looked about he noticed that the amulet had lost all of its warmth and that he could barely feel it against his chest. He realized that the

desire he had been fighting against before was gone. Now was the time to use the talisman.

Jar reached into his tunic and pulled it out by the cord. He gripped it tightly in his left hand wondering how he was supposed to call on its power. As another creature came at him from the right he searched desperately for the secret of the amulet's power. Holding the sword up to defend against the attack he raised the amulet to the sky. As the bird smashed into him his sword was flung from his grip. He was just able to keep from dropping the amulet. He rose from the ground just as the creature was rising. It took to the air and circled back at him, talons pointed towards his upturned face.

Jar remembered a trick his father had once taught him about concentrating when surrounded by confusion. Retreating to the center of his being he concentrated on summoning the power of Drak. He was able to picture the fabric of space and to see a small hole in its center. Diving into the emptiness he swam towards the opening. Coming towards him at a diagonal was a creature similar to the one now attacking him. At first it looked like he was not going to get to the hole before the intruder reached him. Summoning a final surge of energy he burst through the opening into complete darkness. Just as it exploded into dazzling brilliance Jar felt the impact of the bird. The amulet had worked but had it done so soon enough?

(continued next week)