

Quest for the Crown of Trent
Chapter twelve

The unknown foe

By MIKE MACKINNON

(Summary: After Althar's fatal fall from the mountain ledge Valton splits from Jar and Tran and followed his own plans. These took him down into the gorge. Jar and Tran continued on the original route).

Valton followed the trail in the snow but the diminishing light made it a difficult task. Though there was a moon that night, the walls of the gorge caused shadows that obscured much of the signs of passage. The wizard decided that it was safe to use some of his magic. He was certain that who ever had dragged off the elf's body had no idea he was being followed. Valton pulled a dead branch of a nearby tree and a gentle blue flame erupted from one end. It was just enough to see the trail.

Through most of the night, Valton trailed his unknown foe, never hurrying, never tiring. It was still dark when he came to the end of the gorge. The full moon made the burning branch unnecessary. Valton dropped it in the snow and started out once again. There were dark stains on the trail, meaning that the body being dragged was still bleeding. That meant that Althar was still alive, but for

how long Valton had no idea.

As he travelled across the frozen ground, Valton thought about who he was following. He was almost certain that it was Drak, for he knew of no one else who had the power to cause the events that had transpired the day before. He was also sure that the evil wizard wanted the elf alive. Althar must have some value to him.

The first rays of the morning sun saw Valton reach the lower levels of the mountains. From where he stood he was able to see for a great distance across the level ground between him and the North Hain River. He was just able to see a small dark figure. Drak, if it was who Valton was following, had a good lead on him. The wizard was not worried though, for he had a good idea where Drak was headed - the Badlands.

The Badlands was where Drak had his fortress. Valton remembered Jar had said the evil wizard had told him it had been destroyed, but he did not believe it. He was certain that the fortress still stood and would be as difficult to enter now as it had been two thousand years earlier.

Before continuing, Valton fished a silver dish, similar to one he gave Jar, out of his robe. He muttered a single

word and the surface became transparent. At first nothing showed; then a scene began to form, showing Jar and his dwarf companion they were still on the ledge they had

been on when Valton left them. Neither seemed aware of the wizard's evil eye upon them. They had made little progress from the previous day.

Valton followed the path out of the mountain range and on to the plain. There was little to show that someone had passed that way earlier, except for the occasional patch of trampled grass. That did not bother the wizard, however. He headed straight toward the Badlands, taking the quickest possible route. He had one thing in his favor; he was not being hindered by having to carry someone. That would allow him to make quicker time.

By mid morning he reached the North Hain River. On the opposite side there was a patch of ground that had not dried up yet. Someone has crossed the river from that point. Valton was able to figure out that he had gained considerably by the dampness of the ground. Not much time had passed between the earlier crossing and his own.

As the day wore on, Valton grew tired and he wondered how his enemy managed to continue. Had he guessed the wrong identity? Or had he

underestimated Drak's power? That blast from their original encounter had been enough to destroy anybody, so if Drak had survived it he should be considerably weakened.

Valton began to worry about just who it was he was following. He was now no longer certain that it was Drak and wondered whether there might be a third person involved. But then why was their course taking them to the Badlands? Was this third person allied with Drak or working on his own? Doubts began to plague the wizard. He wondered whether he had done the right thing in leaving Jar. If he was following someone other than Drak, then Jar and Tran might be open to another attack from the evil wizard.

The worries hounded Valton throughout the rest of the day. By the time he reached the Badlands, he still had not resolved anything and was unable to come up with a plan of action. There were too many variables.

By nightfall Valton reached his destination. In front of him stood Drak's fortress. Soon he would have his answers.

(continued next issue).



KROAN SCROLLS



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