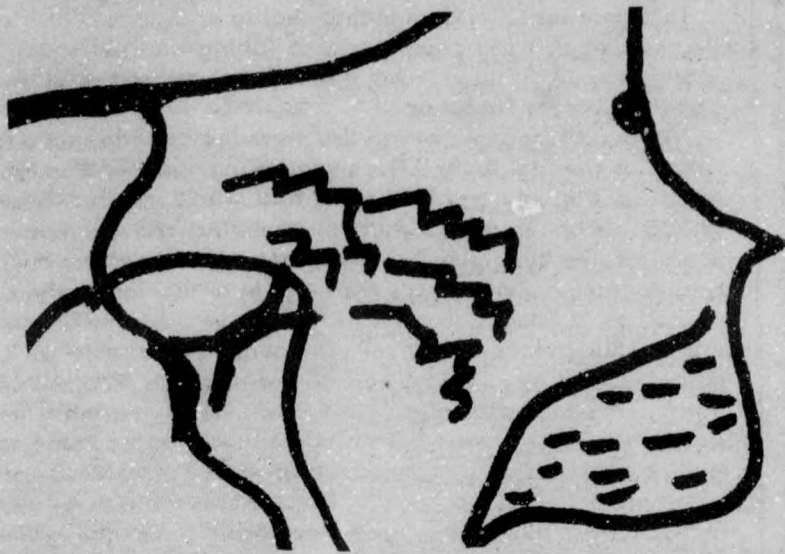


Chapter Eleven  
Quest for the Crown of Trent

A dividing of paths



by MIKE MACKINNON

(Summary: Five days of travelling brought Jar and his three companions to the mid-Haln Mountain range. Shortly after starting into them the groups encounters a snow storm which blocks them from further progress. While waiting out the storm they are attacked by an unknown assailant. The group decides to advance in the hopes of finding shelter. Althar the Elf slips and despite the desperate efforts of his friends he falls over the side.)

Valton helped Jar back from the precipice. Not a word was

spoken, the grief being too strong. The horses, spooked by the volley of fireballs, had ran back down the path. Whether they had made it over the section ruined by the blasts was something not even the wizard knew. They would have to continue the journey on foot.

Valton took the lead, Tran bringing up the rear. Jar stumbled along, not really watching where he was going. Tran kept a close eye on him. The fireballs had ceased for the moment and Valton was keeping a quick pace so that they would not be caught in another volley. As they hurried

along Tran tried to bolster Jar's morale.

"There is nothing you can do now," he said to Jar.

"Yes, but I could have then. If I had of held on a little longer Althar would be alive." Jar replied.

"It is not your fault. You did your best. If we are to blame anyone its that wizard Drak."

"We don't know if Drak is behind this. For all we know he is dead."

Tran muttered a curse. "You heard what Valton said. Besides, I don't think that Drak will be that easy to kill. You don't manage to stick around for two thousand years without acquiring some instinct for survival."

"You're right about that." Jar agreed. "I wish I knew just what is really going on."

"I know what you mean." Tran growled. "If Drak hadn't of interfered we would probably be a lot closer to our destination and Althar would likely be alive."

"Drak has been meddling in our affairs since we first started out. And now Valton is controlling us."

"I don't much care for the way this whole thing is being

handled. I suggest we head out on our own, the way we did at the start."

"That won't help Althar now." Jar replied gruffly.

"No, but it may help us."

At this point they reached a sheltered alcove. It was small but deep, an ideal spot to wait out the storm. Inside it was dry and the narrow opening kept the wind out. Valton gathered some wood and started a small fire. The cheery blaze helped to warm the small cave. Jar still remained in his black mood.

Tran was restless, pacing about and muttering. Valton sat with his back to a wall, staring into the fire. He was lost in thought. Jar watched Tran pace. The dwarf came over and stood in front of the wizard.

"Valton, Jar and I think that we should finish this quest on our own."

Valton looked at Jar. "Is what he is saying true?"

Jar nodded. "Well I guess I can't really blame you for feeling this way," the wizard replied. "if that is what you wish then we will separate."

"Separate?" Tran yelled. "We want to finish this without your help?"

Valton shook his head. "You aren't aware of what this whole thing involves. The future of Kroan depends on the successful completion of your quest. This is not simply a matter of recovering a stolen crown. I guarantee you that you will have to do battle with the forces of Drak and you will not win that on your own. You will need help."

"How do we know what you say is true." Jar asked. "So far we have been betrayed by one wizard and now you are asking us to believe you. I no longer know what or who to believe."

"Well then I have no choice. However, I will not totally wipe my hands of the affair. I will be watching your progress and trying to help you behind the scenes."

Tran agreed begrudgingly. Jar was not sure whether he liked the idea but decided he did not really have any choice.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" he asked.

Valton seemed reluctant to answer. "I am going to go down into the gorge and have a look around. Hopefully I can find some sign of who it was that was attacking us."

Neither Jar nor Tran voiced what was on their mind. Somewhere in that gorge lay the body of Althar. Jar wondered what the wizard would do if he came upon it. Hopefully give the elf a decent burial. Jar had a suspicion that the elf was one reason Valton

was so agreeable about seperating. The wizard obviously had some ideas of his own. Jar hoped that they were going to aid them rather than hinder them.

It did not take long for the storm to abate. The three men clambered out of the cave into right sunlight. The path was completely covered in snow that was at least a foot and a half deep. In some spots it had drifted to create almost impassable barriers.

Valton passed Jar a small silver disk that glinted in the sunlight.

"Keep this with you," he said. "With this I will be aware of any danger that threatens you. This way I will have some chance of helping you."

Jar accepted the disk and placed it in his pack. He was not certain about the good intentions of the wizard but did not really want to anger a man of his power. The disk might prove helpful.

With an abrupt nod of his head Valton started down the steep mountain side. The snow was waist deep and slowed him down considerably. He stumbled a few times but was able to eventually make to the gorge. Once there he looked about. He saw what he was looking for not more than thirty feet away.

He hurried over to an area of trampled snow. The snow was stained by blood and showed signs of there being someone else besides the elf being there. Whoever had been there had dragged off the body of Althar. There was a large trail in the snow and blood showed on some patches. Valton followed the trail.

Jar decided to take the lead. He forged a path through the deep snow wide enough that the stout dwarf would have as little trouble as possible. He thought once more about his fallen companion. There was something that bothered him about Althar's death but he was unable to figure it out. At the last of it the elf had not even bothered to cry and save himself. It was almost as if he had wanted to die. One thing was certain though. He was not the only one had feelings of suspicion about Althar's death. Valton was up to something. He was being very secretive and Jar wondered why. He had seemed almost anxious to be seperate from the others.

As they trudged through the snow Jar thought about the changes the last weeks had seen in their lives. He wondered what other changes there would be.

(continued next issue)

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