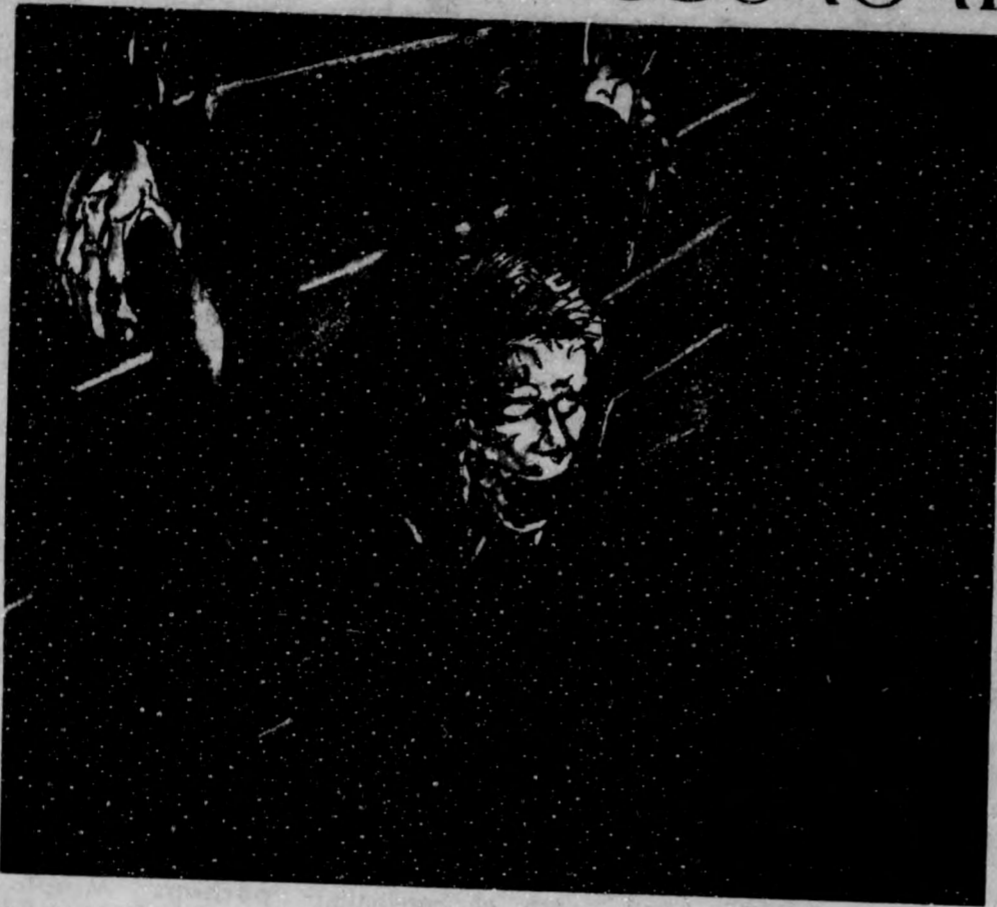


Chapter Eighteen

So close to the Crown



MIKE MACKINNON

(Summary: After spending a night in the rain forests of Nymn, a night that saw Jar become transfixed with a face in the flames of their fire, the group finds the Turin Keep in a clearing. There was no sign of any guards so the three companions made their way across the clearing. Finding a breach in the walls of the Keep Jar climbs through. Just as he turns to check on his companions he is hit over the head.)

Jar came to and found that his arms and legs were in manacles. He was laying in a dark and dingy cell, the floor of which was covered with dirty, damp straw. The cell was in total darkness. As his vision returned somewhat he was able to see that his room of confinement was about four feet wide and just as many long. He tried standing and banged his head on the low ceiling.

The chains were long enough to allow Jar to walk to the small window in the door. There were five vertical bars firmly imbedded in the oak frame. Jar pulled on one using both hands but it would not budge. Warily he wandered back to the corner and wondered about escape.

A scraping noise came from the end of the corridor and a shaft of light shot into the darkness. Jar hurried to the grate and peered out. The person he had last seen before blacking out was now

striding down the corridor flanked on either side by burly guards. Jar stepped back when they arrived at his cell.

"Well, Farnel, you have finally arrived." Jar merely glared back. "I would like to welcome you to Turin Keep. It is unfortunate your stay will not be more enjoyable."

"You're wasting your time Turin."

Turin raised an eyebrow. "I see you know who I am."

"Drak revealed more to me than he realized."

"No matter. There is no way you can stop me now, not locked away in this cell. Soon Haln will be involved in civil war and the upheaval will allow me to walk in and simply take over. Of course I will appear as a hero when I restore order to the continent."

Jar realized Turin did not know of the presence somewhere in the keep of Tran and Tralick. "Aren't you forgetting about Drak?"

Turin smiled evilly. "Drak has been taken care of. Not even a wizard can escape the fires of hell." Jar saw a glimmer of hope. With Drak out of the way it would be a lot easier to escape from the Keep with the crown. "I was able to rid myself of both Drak and Valton. Your friend Althar was quite helpful in that matter. I was able to convince Drak that he should take the elf to the Badlands and lure Valton there. The plan was for Drak to destroy Valton, but I knew, the

energies released by their battling would awaken the forces of a volcano that has lain dormant for years. Both wizards have been destroyed." Turin appeared very smug about his scheming.

"What are your plans for me?" Jar asked fearfully.

"I have not quite decided. Your determination and courage are admirable qualities and had we not been enemies I would have welcomed you into my camp. As it is now, I regret I will have to kill you. I wish it could be another way but it cannot. You pitted against my strongest warrior this afternoon in order that you may have a sporting chance."

With that Turin turned away from the grate and headed back up the corridor. Jar returned to his corridor and thought about his fate. He was confident in his ability as a warrior but was not certain how he would fare against Turin's best. The weeks of travel had weakened him considerably and he was without weapon. Jar did trust enough in Turin's gallantry to believe he would provide him with a weapon.

The rest of the morning Jar spent mulling over the options he faced. His defeat was highly probable and therefore, the downfall of Haln. He wondered why he had been picked to rescue the crown. Why had it not been somebody else? Somebody more capable. His inability

was going to bring the ruin of Haln. One of his dear friends was dead because of the quest, Valton was lost forever and a number of men lost with the Ste. Lucifius. All because of the quest and it was about to fail. Unless Jar could defeat Turin's warrior. Even if he did there was still no guarantee he could stop Turin.

The grating of the door at the corridor's end roused Jar out of his musing. Turin appeared at the small grate then motioned for one of the guards. The door opened and Jar was dragged out roughly by the guard.

"The time has come Farnel." Turin's eyes held a glint of malice.

"What happens if I defeat your warrior?" Jar demanded.

Turin smiled casually. "A highly unlikely outcome, yet I do not refuse to recognize its possibility. Should you indeed be victorious I would allow you to walk from the keep untouched. It is much too late for you to alter the course of events. I have set in motion. Should you, however, choose to attempt to stop me again I would not hesitate to eliminate you."

Jar shuddered at the last comment. He had no difficulty believing Turin would carry out his threats. However, his problem right now was to find some way of winning against Turin's champion. Jar wondered where his companions were. He could really use their help right about now.

The two guards who were ever present led Jar to a small fighting square. His opponent was already there. As Jar stepped into the square he sized the man up. He was a good foot taller than Jar and was covered with dark curly hair. This did not prevent Jar from seeing the all too noticeable movement of muscle as the warrior paced back and forth. The man looked more animal than human, so much so that Jar

wondered at his descent. His hair was long, scraggly and thickly matted. He had a heavy brow that gave him an ape-like appearance. His arms hung loosely by his side and were longer than the average man's. Strapped at his side was a heavy looking broad sword. Jar was weaponless.

Jar realized immediately he stood no chance against his opponent. He had no weapon and was obviously outmatched in strength. He circled the warrior looking for an opening. He was about to strike a bare fist below when "STOP" was shouted across the compound. This distracted him so he did not see the flat bladed swipe of the broad sword. It caught him across the arm knocking him to the ground. He stared up at the upraised sword but the blow never came. The huge warrior's eyes glazed over and he slumped to the ground. Jar clambered to his feet and saw Turin being confronted by Drak. Turin's plans had failed.

Taking advantage of the confusion Jar slipped from the square and ran off to the low roofed building he hoped was Turin's quarters. Slipping in through the partially opened door he saw he had guessed correctly. Sitting in the open on a velvet topped table was the Crown of Trent. No harm had come to it and it had recently been cleaned. Someone had been taking good care of it for future use. Jar grabbed it and ran from the room.

He ran around the corner of the building and almost ran into Turin.

"I will take that back," the Keep's ruler said harshly.

"Not without a fight you won't," Jar retorted.

"That would be unwise." Jar turned to see he was blocked by a group of guards with Drak at their head. His hopes for Haln died within him.

(to be completed next issue)

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