

Chapter sixteen

# Escape from the Badlands



(Summary: Jar and Tran have set sail on the Ste. Lucifus with Tralic and Syph. Jar notices the Shaman watching their departure. He does not have long to think about the healer's presence in Oceanic Port because they are caught in a storm.

In the meantime, Valton has released Althar from his cell. Their escape is almost certain but they encounter Drak.)

Valton stared at the two wizards. Both were garbed identically, their cloaks being made of royal blue material. The hoods were drawn over their heads casting their faces in shadow. It was easy for Valton to recognize Drak despite his inability to see his face. The other wizard was a

stranger though. He was taller than Drak and had a heavier build. His robe was of the same blue material as the cloak and had a single sun on the chest. Drak's robe had a similar sun. This was the sign of the covenant of scorcerers Drak had set up just before his imprisonment. The second wizard was one of his disciples.

"I knew that I hadn't finished you in the Ravine," Valton said evenly.

"Of course. You didn't really expect it to be that easy did you?" Drak asked. "I just wanted your companions to think you had killed me. It caused them to become careless and made it easier for me to capture one of them."

"What did you want from the elf?"

"Information." Drak slowly made his way to the opposite side of the room. Valton could see what he was up to. With a wizard on either side of him he would have a difficult time defending himself. "I wanted to find out just what Jar Farnel's plans were."

"I would have thought that obvious," Valton said.

"Oh, I know he intends to journey to the Turin Dynasty but just what he is going to do there I don't know. I had hoped he would have confided in his companions."

Valton knew Jar enough to know that he would keep that information to himself in order to protect his friends. "I gather you were disappointed."

"Such is life." Drak had reached the other side of the room. "I did get the other thing I wanted."

"What was that?" Valton knew full well what Drak was talking about.

"You." Drak raised both arms and twin flames shot at Valton. Valton was just able to deflect them with a counter spell. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the other scorcerer raise his arms. He dropped to the floor and rolled towards Drak just as a bolt of lightning smashed into the rock.

"Run," he yelled at Althar. The elf ran towards the door. Drak fired a fireball at him but had mistimed it. It hit behind the elf. Althar ran through the doorway. Valton threw a fireball of his own at Drak but the second wizard hit it in midflight with one of his bolts. The explosion shook the room, blinding all three for a few seconds. Valton took advantage of the opportunity to get into a better position. As his eyesight returned he saw Drak rising from the floor. He took aim at the wizard and was just about to fire a blast when he felt a hit on his side. The force of it threw him against the wall.

"Antar," Drak yelled at the other wizard, "get on the other side."

Valton tried to get up but was still stunned by the force of the blow he had received. Cursing himself for his misjudgement he followed the only choice he had. He started to chant in a language that was familiar to the others. He was attempting to set a protection spell that would temporarily keep him safe from the attacks of Drak and Antar. The spell would not last long though and would cost him dearly in energy. However it was the only choice he had until he was better able to defend himself.

Drak caught on to what Valton was doing and aimed a

fireball at him. Valton was forced to move to avoid getting hit and this caused him to lose some of the needed concentration. The spell wavered and almost collapsed but the wizard caught himself just in time. Putting forth more energy he completed the chant. Now he had protection, for a while at least. This was a spell he had designed himself and only he knew how to penetrate it. No matter what Drak or Antar threw at him he would come to no harm. Unfortunately, it was only temporary.

Despite the energy drain caused by maintaining the protection spell Valton felt his strength returning. Slowly he got to his feet. Drak and Antar simply watched, for they were aware that there was nothing they could do. Valton started moving towards the door. In frustration Drak and Antar started hurling anything they could summon at the wizard. Everything exploded just short of Valton as it hit an invisible wall. The wizard walked through unscathed.

Once he escaped the room Valton started towards the fortress entrance. He ran against the left wall in order to avoid the openings. His spell was beginning to fade with the extra effort of running. Not far behind could be heard sounds of pursuit. Drak had to be aware that the spell would not last forever. Soon Valton would be open to attack.

A deep rumbling started from the depths of the chasm and soon the floor began to shake. Valton was not sure whether Drak was responsible or if it was a natural earthquake. Whatever the case he had to get out of there. Without warning, the floor opened in front of Valton. Desperately he jumped but when he landed on the far side the rock gave way. In desperation he clawed at the floor but found no hand hold. Behind him Drak laughed.

Valton slipped bit by bit into the opening until all that stopped him from falling was the precarious grip of his fingers on the rock edge. At that point Drak and Antar arrived on the scene.

"Well, Valton," Drak laughed. "It looks like I am finally going to be rid of you." Valton said nothing. "Nothing to say. What a shame. I had hoped to see you beg for mercy."

"I wouldn't give you the satisfaction," Valton grunted. Pain lanced through his fingers and he knew he could not hang on much longer. "You haven't seen the last of me."

"Brave words from a helpless man," Drak said sarcastically.

At that moment a rock hit Antar in the head. He looked about to see who had thrown the rock but it was too dark. From below there came an eerie red glow that bathed the three wizards in its light. The rumbling started again but this time there was no ground movement. A look of terror came over Drak. This was not of his making. Somewhere below in the chasm a volcano was coming to life. With a yell of fear the wizard ran back into the center of the fortress followed by Antar. Valton tried to pull himself out but was unable to. He awaited the inevitable.

Althar came out of the dark towards the wizard. He hurried to the edge of the opening and grabbed the wizards arms. He was still weak but with the help of Valton pushing against the wall of the opening he was able to get him free. The rumbling was growing louder and the light had become considerably brighter. The air in the corridor was getting hotter. Valton realized there was not much time before it blew. The light was enough that he could see easily. Grabbing Althar by the arm he rushed through the hallway. He reached the heavy oak doors and pushed on them. They would not budge. Valton stepped back and threw a conjured fireball at them. It exploded against the doors splintering the wood. Valton and Althar stepped through the smoke.

The dais was shaking furiously and looked like it was ready to collapse. Valton and Althar ran across the bridge and did not stop until they were a safe distance from the chasm. From there they watched the fortress collapse in upon itself. Then a roar exploded from the depths and lava and rock flew from the chasm. The dais crashed into the bottom of the chasm. Valton and Althar watched in horror, as molten debris was thrown high into the air, some of it landing on the ground near the chasm.

"I guess Drak is gone this time," Althar said.

"It would appear so," Valton agreed. "Your memory has returned." Althar merely nodded his head. "Perhaps now Jar can complete his quest. He still has to fight time though. He lost a lot of it because of all these delays."

"He will do it," Althar said confidently.

Valton decided they should go but wanted to check on the other two first. He pulled the disk from his robe and watched as the smoke cleared. The surface was blank.

(continued next issue)

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