

DRAGONS OF  
DELTORA

# DRAGON'S NEST

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*For Reuben Jakeman*

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## 1 - The Voice in the Crystal

**U**nwillingly, Lief joined the crowd flocking up the sweeping stairs to the palace of Del. His legs felt heavier with every step. The sweet morning air was cool, but his hands were slippery with sweat.

The other people on the stairs stood back respectfully to let him pass. Some bowed low. Many smiled and waved, thrilled to see their king among them. All whispered and pointed at the glittering jeweled Belt he wore — the magic Belt of Deltora.

Lief forced smiles and waves in return, but his heart sank as he saw how thin the people were, how shadowed were their eyes.

He looked up. The great carved doors of the palace yawned wide above him. Through the doorway he could see only darkness. And from the darkness . . .

## *Dragon's Nest*

*I am waiting for you, little king.*

The voice of the Shadow Lord struck, hissing, in his mind. He had been prepared for it but still he froze.

*Are you greeting your miserable people, little king? the jeering voice whispered. Fools! They look at you and think, King Lief and his brave companions Barda and Jasmine rid Deltora of the Shadow Lord's tyranny, and drove him back to the Shadowlands. King Lief rescued the prisoners the Enemy was keeping in slavery, and returned them to their homes. Now, surely, King Lief can make us live happily ever after . . .*

The voice trailed away in mocking laughter. Lief gritted his teeth and kept climbing.

He could not let the voice drive him away, back to the blacksmith's forge that was once again his home.

Tonight it would be a full moon, and that meant that today was the day of the monthly public meeting. People had come from far and wide to speak to their king. He could not disappoint them.

At the top of the stairs he looked back, as if to catch one last glimpse of the morning before the cold shadows of the palace closed around him.

A black bird was swooping down towards him from the pale blue sky. It was holding something in its claws.

*Kree!* Lief thought, his spirits lifting. *Kree, bringing me word from Jasmine! Perhaps Jasmine has decided to*

*leave Mother and Doom in the west, and return to Del sooner than expected. Perhaps she is here now!*

Eagerly he looked towards the road. But he could see no familiar black-haired figure among the people streaming towards the palace. And as the bird plunged downward he realized that it was not Kree at all.

He stood motionless, watching it. The bird wheeled above him, its yellow eye marking his position. Then a tiny package dropped at his feet with a muffled clang.

He picked up the package and raised his hand. The bird gave a harsh cry and soared away, towards the northwest.

The people on the stairs eyed the package nervously. Jasmine had begun training messenger birds not long ago, so they were still an uncommon sight in Del. And black birds had not always meant well in the days of the Shadow Lord.

"It is just a message from Dread Mountain," Lief called as casually as he could. He pulled off the package's outer covering and showed the note wrapped tightly around an arrowhead and tied in place with twine.

*You have stopped again, coward. Very wise. Now turn and run, like the sniveling blacksmith's son you really are.*

Lief moved quickly through the palace doors, into the vast, echoing space of the entrance hall.

The hall was already crowded with chattering people. Lief knew that the noise must be great, but to him it seemed nothing more than a low drone. It was as though he were trapped inside a bubble.

Every sound outside the bubble was muffled. Only the evil whisper inside it seemed real.

*Ah, you are closer to me now. Do you see your people before you, swarming like starving rats?*

Lief looked down at the jeweled Belt. The ruby was pale. The emerald was dull. The gems felt danger. Evil . . .

"Lief! What news?"

The voice rang out, confident and strong, shattering the bubble, setting him free.

Lief looked up and saw Barda striding towards him, dressed for the meeting in his uniform of chief of the palace guards.

The pale blue uniform trimmed with gold was very different from the rough clothes Barda had worn when Lief had first met him. But Barda's brown, bearded face was the same, though his broad grin was a little forced. He looked at Lief closely as he clasped his hand.

Wordlessly Lief showed him the arrowhead.

Barda glanced around the crowded entrance hall, then jerked his head towards a roped-off hallway at one side. "We will get some peace in the new library," he murmured. "Old Josef is still at breakfast."

Lief nodded and together they stepped over the

rope barrier and hurried down the hallway. Soon they were standing in the huge, box-filled room that was Josef the librarian's despair.

Josef had not wanted to move the library down to the ground floor. The old library on the third floor of the palace had been his pride and joy. He wanted it to stay exactly as it had always been.

But Lief had insisted. The third floor of the palace was not safe. It had to be closed and never used again. For on the third floor, at the end of a sealed hallway, in the center of a bricked-up white room, was . . .

*You will never be free of me, Lief of Deltora. Whenever I wish I can speak to you — and to others, when I am ready. Ah, I look forward to playing with those weaker, flabbier minds. They bend and break so easily. So easily . . .*

Lief felt Barda's hand grip his shoulder.

"Do you hear him too?" Lief asked dully.

*The crystal is the window through which my mind and voice can reach you. You will never be free of me. Never . . .*

"Not as you do, I think," Barda said. "For me, there is only a feeling. A bad, bad feeling . . ."

Lief looked at his friend. Barda's face was grim.

"You should not be sleeping at the palace, Barda," he said. "This is getting worse."

"Far worse for you than for me," Barda said. "You should not have come."

"Even at the forge the whisperings enter my

dreams," Lief muttered. "And, in any case, the palace is the only place big enough for the monthly meeting."

"Then stop the meetings for a time," Barda said. "Until we can build —"

"No!" Lief broke in. "That is what he *wants*, Barda! He is trying to make me break faith with the people. Things are bad enough as it is. I should not be holding these meetings only in Del, leaving all the traveling to Mother and Doom. But I cannot take the Belt away, leave Del unprotected from that — that *thing* upstairs!"

Blindly he tore at the twine around the arrow-head and freed the note. As he smoothed the paper out, Barda gave a snort of disgust.

"Why does the old fool write in code?" Barda exploded. "We are supposed to be living in a time of peace!"

"The Dread Gnomes have always been suspicious folk," Lief said. "Perhaps the young ones will change in time, but old ones like Fa-Glin never will."

He shrugged. "And in any case, this code is as simple as can be — only intended to baffle the quick glances of strangers. See? Fa-Glin has just written out his message putting all the letters into groups of four, with no full stops."

Barda snatched the note, cursed under his breath because he had not seen the trick at once, then haltingly began to read the message aloud.

GREETINGS, Dief, King of DELTORA!  
THIS IS THE REPORT OF FA. GLIN  
OF THE DREAD GNOMES.

IGRI	EVET	OTEL	LYOU	THAT
THEN	EWCR	OPON	WHIC	HWEP
INNE	DOUR	HOPE	SHAS	BEEW
DISA	PFDI	NTIN	GTHE	VINE
SWER	ESIC	XYLF	ROMT	HEFI
RSTA	NIDON	LYSI	XBAS	KETS
OFSM	ALLS	OURF	RUIT	RESU
LTED	FROM	ALLO	URCA	RETH
EYAM	HARJ	ESTW	ASAL	SOVE
RYBA	DMAN	YOFT	HEYA	MSHA
VING	ROTT	EDIN	THEG	ROUN
DHUN	TING	ISFO	ORTH	CREA
REFE	WFIS	HINT	HEST	REAM
IFON	LYWE	COUL	DEAT	THEF
RUIT	OFTH	EBOO	LONG	TREE
SLIK	FOUR	NEIG	HBOW	RSTH
EKIN	THEB	OOLO	NGTR	EST
HRIV	ELIK	ETRE	WCEB	STHE
YARE	BUTA	ULPA	RTSO	FTHE
MDIS	AGRE	EWIT	HUSI	TWIL
LBEA	NOTA	ERHA	RDWI	NTER
ONDR	EADM	OUNT	AWI	FEAR

YOUR RESPECTFUL SERVANT,

FA - GLIN

"I grieve to tell you that the new crop on which we pinned our hopes has been disappointing. The vines were sickly from the first, and only six baskets of small, sour fruit resulted from all our care. The yam harvest was also very bad, many of the yams having rotted in the ground. Hunting is poor. There are few fish in the stream.' "

He broke off, shook his head, then read on:

"If only we could eat the fruit of the boolong trees like our neighbors the Kin! The boolong trees thrive like the weeds they are, but all parts of them disagree with us. It will be another hard winter on Dread Mountain, I fear.' "

He handed the note back to Lief, his face very grave.

"So," he said. "More bad tidings. North, south, east, and west, it is the same story. But Fa-Glin did not ask for food to be sent, as the other tribes did."

"He is too proud for that," said Lief. "He would rather starve than ask for help. And perhaps he guesses that we have little to send, in any case."

Suddenly, he crumpled the note into a ball and threw it across the room.

"Oh, what are we to do?" he groaned. "The people have worked so hard, and we have given them every help we can. But it seems that nothing thrives in Deltora except weeds and thorns. It is as if the land is poisoned!"

"Or cursed," said a quavering voice behind him.