

Deltora Quest



CITY OF THE RATS

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1 - The Trap

Footsore and weary, Lief, Barda, and Jasmine moved west, towards the fabled City of the Rats. They knew little about their goal except that it was a place of evil, deserted by its people long ago. But they were almost sure that one of the seven lost gems of the Belt of Deltora lay hidden there.

They had been walking steadily all day and now, as the glowing sun slipped towards the horizon, they longed to stop for rest. But the road on which they walked, deeply rutted with the tracks of wagons, threaded through a plain where thornbushes had taken hold and spread, covering the land. The thorns lined the road without break, and extended as far as the eye could see.

Lief sighed, and for comfort touched the Belt hidden under his shirt. It held two gems now: the golden topaz and the scarlet ruby. Both had been won

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against great odds, and in the process of winning them, great things had been done.

The people of Raladin, with whom they had stayed for the last two weeks, did not know of their quest to find the lost gems. Manus, the Ralad man who had shared the search for the ruby, was sworn to silence. But it was no secret that the companions had caused the death of the evil sorceress Thaegan, ally of the evil Shadow Lord. It was no secret, either, that two of Thaegan's thirteen children had gone the way of their mother. The Ralads, freed at last from Thaegan's curse, had made many songs of joy, praising the companions for their deeds.

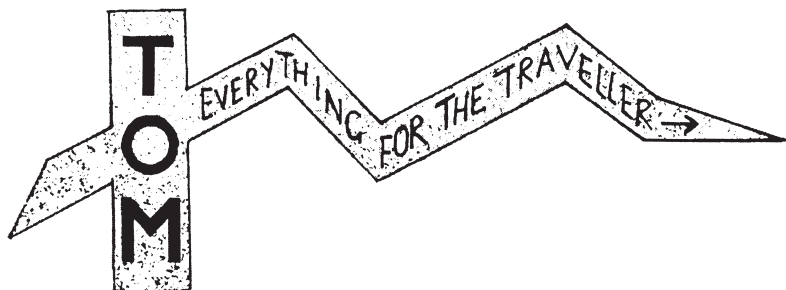
It had been hard to leave them. Hard to leave Manus, and the happiness, safety, good food, and warm, soft beds of the hidden village. But five gems were still to be found, and until they were restored to the Belt, the Shadow Lord's tyranny over Deltora could not be broken. The three companions had to move on.

"These thorns are never-ending," Jasmine complained, her voice breaking into Lief's thoughts. He turned to look at her. As usual, the little furred creature called Filli was nestled on her shoulder, blinking through Jasmine's mass of black hair. Kree, the raven, who was never far out of her sight, was swooping over the thorns nearby, catching insects. He, at least, was filling his belly.

"There is something ahead!" called Barda. He

pointed to a glimmer of white on the side of the road.

Curious and hopeful, they hurried to the place. There, sticking out of the thorns, was a strange sign-post.



“What does it mean?” Jasmine murmured.

“It seems to point the way to some sort of shop,” said Lief.

“What is a shop?”

Lief glanced at the girl in surprise, then remembered that she had spent her life in the Forests of Silence, and had never seen many of the things he took for granted.

“A shop is a place for buying and selling goods,” Barda explained. “In the city of Del, these days, the shops are poor, and many are closed. But once, before the Shadow Lord, there were many, selling food and drink and clothes and other things to the people.”

Jasmine looked at him with her head to one side. Lief realized that even now she did not under-

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stand. For her, food grew on trees and drink ran in the streams. Other things were found or made — and what you could not find or make, you did without.

They tramped on up the road, talking in low voices, trying to forget their tiredness. But soon it was too dark to see, and they had to light a torch to guide their way. Barda held the flickering flame low, but all of them knew that it could still be seen from the air.

The idea that their progress could be followed so easily was not pleasant. The Shadow Lord's spies might even now be patrolling the skies. Also, they had not yet reached the end of Thaegan's territory. Though she was dead, they knew well that where wickedness had held sway for so long, danger threatened everywhere.

About an hour after they had lit the torch, Jasmine stopped, and glanced behind her. "We are being followed," she breathed. "Not just by one, but by many."

Though they themselves could hear nothing, Lief and Barda did not bother asking her how she knew. They had learned that Jasmine's senses were far keener and sharper than their own. She might not know what shops were, she might not be able to read and write more than a little, but in other ways her knowledge was vast.

"They know we are ahead," she whispered. "They stop when we stop, and move when we move."

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Silently Lief pulled up his shirt and looked down at the ruby in the Belt around his waist. His heart thudded as he saw, by the flickering light of the torch, that the deep red gem had faded to a dull pink.

Barda and Jasmine were looking at the stone also. They knew, as Lief did, that the ruby paled when danger threatened its wearer. Its message, now, was clear.

"So," Barda muttered. "Our followers have evil intent. Who are they? Could Kree fly back, and —?"

"Kree is not an owl!" snapped Jasmine. "He cannot see in the dark, any more than we can." She crouched, put her ear to the ground, and frowned, listening intently. "The followers are not Grey Guards, at least," she said at last. "They move too quietly for that, and they are not marching in time."

"It is a band of robbers, perhaps, thinking to ambush us when we stop to sleep or rest. We must turn and fight!" Lief's hand was already on the hilt of his sword. The songs of the Ralad people were ringing in his ears. What was a ragged crew of robbers compared to the monsters he, Barda, and Jasmine had faced and defeated?

"The middle of a road hemmed in by thorns is no good place to make a stand, Lief," said Barda grimly. "And there is nowhere here that we could hide, to take enemies by surprise. We should move on, to try to find a better place."

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They began to walk again, faster now. Lief kept glancing behind him, but there was nothing to be seen in the shadows at his back.

They came to a dead tree that stood like a ghost at the side of the road, its white trunk rising out of the thornbushes. Moments after they had passed it, Lief sensed a change in the air. The back of his neck began to prickle.

"They are gaining speed," Jasmine panted.

Then they heard it. A long, low howl that chilled the blood.

Filli, clutching Jasmine's shoulder, made a small, frightened sound. Lief saw that the fur was standing up all over his tiny body.

There was another howl, and another.

"Wolves!" hissed Jasmine. "We cannot outrun them. They are almost upon us!"

She tore two more torches from her pack and thrust them into the flame of the one she already held. "They will fear the fire," she said, pushing the newly burning sticks into Lief's and Barda's hands. "But we must face them. We must not turn our backs."

"We are to walk backwards all the way to Tom's shop?" Lief joked feebly, gripping his torch. But Jasmine did not smile, and neither did Barda. He was staring back at the dead tree glimmering white in the distance.

"They did not make their move until we were past that tree," he muttered. "They wished to prevent

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us climbing it, and escaping them. These are no ordinary wolves.”

“Be ready,” Jasmine warned.

She already had her dagger in her hand. Lief and Barda drew their swords. They stood together, the torches held high, waiting.

And with another chorus of bloodcurdling howls, out of the darkness surged what seemed a sea of moving pinpoints of yellow light — the eyes of the wolves.

Jasmine lashed her torch from side to side in front of her. Lief and Barda did the same, so that the road in front of them was blocked by a moving line of flame.

The beasts slowed, but still moved forward, growling. As they came closer to the light, Lief could see that, indeed, they were no ordinary wolves. They were huge, covered with shaggy, matted fur striped with brown and yellow. Their lips curled back from their snarling jaws and their open, dripping mouths were not red inside, but black.

He counted them quickly. There were eleven. For some reason, that number meant something to him, but he could not think why. In any case, there was no time to worry about such things. With Barda and Jasmine he began to back away, keeping his torch moving. But for every step the companions took, the beasts took one, too.

Lief remembered his weak joke. “We are to walk

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backwards all the way to Tom's shop?" he had asked.

Now it looked as though they might be forced to do just that. The beasts are driving us, he thought.

The beasts are driving us . . . They are not ordinary wolves . . . There are eleven . . .

His stomach lurched. "Barda! Jasmine!" he hissed. "These are not wolves. They are . . ."

But he never finished. For at that moment he and his companions took another step back, the great net trap that had been set for them was sprung, and they were swung, shrieking, into the air.