

# Deltora Quest



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## 1 - Refuge

The day had been fine and clear and there was a slight chill in the air. It was perfect weather for walking, but nothing is pleasant when you are thirsty, tired, and afraid. Lief trudged along, his head bowed, his limbs aching, only dimly aware of Barda and Jasmine moving beside him.

The water bottles were almost empty. Ever since leaving the Shifting Sands the companions had been existing on a few mouthfuls of water a day. But still the flat brown countryside stretched away from them with no sign of river or stream, and the sky, flooded now with the orange of the setting sun, was huge and cloudless.

Lief was walking with his head bent so he would not have to look at the ragged horizon. Dread Mountain was still far distant. It would be weeks before the companions reached it — if they did not die of thirst

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first, Lief thought grimly — but the very thought of it filled him with fear. The knowledge that every step he took brought him closer to the Shadowlands border was more terrifying still.

He hunched his shoulders, thinking with wonder of the boy who had left Del so filled with excitement at the thought of the adventure ahead. That boy now seemed absurdly young. And that time seemed very long ago.

Yet it was not so long — just a few months — and much had been achieved in that time. Four gems now glowed in the Belt of Deltora hidden under Lief's shirt. There were only three stones left to find. Lief knew he should feel happy, hopeful, and triumphant, as Jasmine did. Instead, he was battling gloom and despair.

For, as he looked back, it seemed miraculous to him that the gems had been secured at all. It seemed miraculous that he and his companions had survived the terrors they had faced. For how much longer could such good luck last? Lief's spirit shrank at the thought of what was ahead.

So far too they had escaped the attention of the Shadow Lord, but this time had surely ended. Doom, the scar-faced leader of the Resistance, had said that word was spreading about them. And if Doom had heard whispers, the Shadow Lord had certainly heard them too. Yet here Lief, Barda, and Jasmine walked, in the open air, under the open sky, with Kree flying

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ahead of them. What did it matter that no one knew their names? The description was enough.

Lief jumped nervously and nearly stumbled as a black shape flapped beside his head. But it was only Kree, landing on Jasmine's arm. The bird screeched. Filli poked his furry grey head out of Jasmine's jacket and chattered excitedly.

"Kree says there is water ahead," Jasmine cried. "A small pool — a spring, perhaps, for he could see no stream leading to it. It is in a grove of trees not far from the road."

The thought of water made them all quicken their pace, and it was not long before Kree took flight again and led them off the road. Dodging bushes and rocks, they followed him until at last they entered a grove of pale, odd-looking trees.

And there, sure enough, right in the center, was a small round pool surrounded by white stones. Eagerly they ran towards it. Then they saw that fixed to one of the stones was a dull brass plate with words engraved upon it — words they could just make out in the dimming light:

DREAMING SPRING

DRINK, GENTLE STRANGER,  
AND WELCOME.

ALL OF EVIL WILL BEWARE.

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The companions hesitated. The spring was clear and tempting. Their thirst was very great. But the words on the brass plate made them all nervous. Was the water safe to drink?

"Jasmine, what do the trees say?" muttered Barda. Once Barda had doubted Jasmine's ability to talk to growing things, but this time had long passed.

Jasmine frowned. "They do not say anything," she said, looking around. "They are completely silent. I do not understand it."

Lief shivered. The grove was green and still. Lush, soft grass grew underfoot. It was like a little paradise, yet there was a strange feeling in the air. He ran his tongue over his dry lips. "It might be better if we do not drink from this spring," he said reluctantly. "It could be enchanted — or poisoned."

"We are not of evil will," Barda protested. "Surely it will be safe for us."

But he remained where he was, and did not approach the spring.

Filli chattered impatiently on Jasmine's shoulder.

"We are all thirsty, Filli," Jasmine murmured. "But we must wait. We are not sure — Filli! No!"

The little creature had leaped to the ground. He scuttled to the pool, ignoring Jasmine's cries. In a moment he had dipped his head into the crystal waters and was drinking deeply.

"Filli!" called Jasmine in despair.

But for once Filli was not listening. He was lost

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in the joy of quenching his terrible thirst.

And he did not become sick. He did not fall.

Kree was the next to fly to the spring. He, too, drank, dipping his beak and tipping back his head over and over again. He too showed no ill effects. And after that, Lief, Barda, and Jasmine could wait no longer, but ran to the pool themselves.

The water was cold and sweet. Never had Lief tasted anything so good. At home in Del the water was just as cold, but always tasted of the metal pump.

When at last they had drunk as much as they needed, the companions filled their water bottles to the brim in case they had to make a quick escape in the night. The grove seemed safe, but they had learned that it was unwise to trust appearances.

They sat on the grass and ate as the moon rose and stars appeared in the sky above them. It was cold, but they had decided against making a fire. Even a small blaze would be like a beacon, signalling their presence. Also for safety's sake, they moved well into the cover of the trees before unrolling their blankets. Others might know of the spring and come to drink from it in the night.

"How careful we have become," yawned Jasmine, gathering her blanket around her. "I remember a time when we were bolder."

"Things are different now," muttered Lief. "Now they are looking for us." He shivered.

Barda glanced at him quickly, then turned away

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to mask the concern in his eyes. "We will sleep in turns. I will take the first watch," he said.

Kree squawked.

"You need sleep too, Kree," smiled Jasmine. "You are very tired. You cannot guard us all night long. You and Filli and I will watch together when Barda wakes us."

She turned over and closed her eyes, her hand in Filli's soft fur. Drowsily Lief watched as Kree began to flutter up to a tree branch above her head. Then the bird seemed to change his mind, wheeling and dropping back down to the grass. He hopped close to Jasmine and settled there, tucking his head under his wing.

Lief felt a small flicker of fear. "Barda," he called softly. "Look at Kree."

Barda, hunched beneath the blanket he had thrown around himself for warmth, stirred and turned around.

"Why is he sleeping on the ground instead of perching on a branch?" Lief whispered.

"Perhaps he does not like the trees," Barda whispered back. "Jasmine said they were silent. And certainly they are strange. Have you noticed that they look exactly alike?"

Lief looked around him and realized that Barda was right. That was one of the reasons why the trees looked so odd. Every single one had the same straight, smooth trunk, the same three branches pointing to the

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sky, the same thick clusters of pale leaves. His spine tingled.

“Lief, stop worrying, I beg you!” Barda growled after a moment. “Whatever is troubling Kree, it is not enough to stop him from taking his rest. I suggest you follow his example. You will regret it if you do not. Your turn to keep watch will come soon enough.”

Slowly Lief pulled his blanket more tightly around him and lay down. For a minute or two he stared up at the star-spangled night sky framed by the pale leaves of the strange trees. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves. No insects chirped. There was no sound at all except for Jasmine’s soft breathing.

His eyelids grew heavy. Soon he could not keep them open, and he did not try. If Kree is not afraid to sleep, neither am I, he thought. After all, what can befall us while Barda is keeping watch?

In moments he was asleep. So he did not see Barda’s head droop gently to his chest. He did not hear Barda’s quiet snores.

And he did not feel the passing of silent feet as the dwellers of the grove moved softly to the Dreaming Spring.