


Deltora Quest



THE LAKE OF TEARS

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1 - The Bridge

Lief, Barda, and Jasmine walked through the crisp, bright morning. The sky was palest blue. The sun slanted between the trees, lighting with bars of gold the winding path they trod. The dark terrors of the Forests of Silence were far behind them.

On such a day, Lief thought, striding along behind Barda, it would be easy to believe that all was well in Deltora. Away from the crowded, ruined city of Del, away from the sight of patrolling Grey Guards and the misery of people living in hunger and fear, you could almost forget that the Shadow Lord ruled in the land.

But it would be foolish to forget. The countryside was beautiful, but danger lurked everywhere on the road to the Lake of Tears.

Lief glanced behind him and met Jasmine's eyes.

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Jasmine had not wanted to come this way. She had argued against it with all her strength.

Now she walked as lightly and silently as always, but her body was stiff and her mouth was set in a straight, hard line. This morning she had tied her long hair back with a strip of cloth torn from her ragged clothes. Without its usual frame of wild brown curls her face seemed very small and pale and her green eyes looked huge.

The little furry creature she called Filli was clinging to her shoulder, chattering nervously. Kree, the raven, was fluttering clumsily through the trees beside her as if unwilling to keep to the ground but also unwilling to fly too far ahead.

And in that moment Lief realized, with a shock, just how afraid they were.

But Jasmine was so brave in the Forests, he thought, turning quickly back to face the front. She risked her life to save us. This part of Deltora is dangerous, certainly. But then, in these days of the Shadow Lord there is danger everywhere. What is so special about this place? Is there something she has not told us?

He remembered the argument that had taken place as the three companions had discussed where they would go after they left the Forests of Silence.

"It is madness to go through the land to the north!" Jasmine had insisted, her eyes flashing. "The sorceress Thaegan rules there."

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"It has always been her stronghold, Jasmine," Barda pointed out patiently. "Yet in the past many travelers passed through it and survived to tell the tale."

"Thaegan is ten times more powerful now than she ever was!" exclaimed Jasmine. "Evil loves evil, and the Shadow Lord has increased her strength so that now she is swollen with vanity as well as wickedness. If we travel through the north we are doomed!"

Lief and Barda glanced at each other. Both had been glad when Jasmine decided to leave the Forests of Silence and join them on their quest to find the lost gems of the Belt of Deltora. It was thanks to her that they had not perished in the Forests. It was thanks to her that the first stone, the golden topaz, was now fixed to the Belt Lief wore hidden under his shirt. They knew that Jasmine's talents would be of great use as they moved on to find the six remaining stones.

But for a long time Jasmine had lived by her wits, with no one to please but herself. She was not used to following the plans of others, and had no fear of speaking her feelings plainly. Now Lief was realizing, with some annoyance, that there were going to be times when Jasmine was an uncomfortable, unruly companion.

"We are sure that one of the gems is hidden at the Lake of Tears, Jasmine," he said sharply. "So we must go there."

Jasmine stamped her foot impatiently. "Of

course!" she exclaimed. "But we do not have to travel all the way through Thaegan's territory to do it. Why are you so stubborn and foolish, Lief? The Lake is at the edge of Thaegan's lands. If we approach it from the south, making a wide circle, we can avoid her notice till the very end."

"Such a journey would force us to cross the Os-Mine Hills, so would take five times as long," growled Barda, before Lief could answer. "And who knows what dangers the Hills themselves might hold? No. I believe we should go the way we have planned."

"I, too," Lief agreed. "So it is two against one."

"It is not!" Jasmine retorted. "Kree and Filli vote with me."

"Kree and Filli do not have a vote," growled Barda, finally losing patience. "Jasmine — come with us or return to the Forests. The decision is yours."

With that, he strode away, with Lief close behind him. Jasmine, after a long minute, walked slowly after them. But she was frowning, and in the days that followed, she had grown more and more grave and silent.



Lief was thinking so deeply that he almost cannoned into Barda, who had stopped abruptly just around a bend in the track. He started to apologize, but Barda waved his arm for silence, and pointed.

They had reached the end of the tree-lined pathway, and directly ahead of them yawned a great

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chasm, its bare, rocky cliffs gleaming pink in the sunlight. Over the terrible drop swayed a narrow bridge made of rope and wooden planks. And in front of the bridge stood a huge, golden-eyed, dark-skinned man holding a wickedly curved sword.

Like a gaping wound in the earth, the chasm stretched away to left and right as far as the eye could see. Wind blew through it, making a soft, eerie sound, and great brown birds swooped on the gusts like enormous kites, wings spread wide.

There was no way across except the swaying bridge. But the way to the bridge was barred by the golden-eyed giant, who stood unmoving and unblinking, on guard.