Deltora Quest

THE SHIFTING SANDS

EMILY RODDA

Scholastic Inc.
New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Permissions Department, Scholastic Australia, PO Box 579, Lindfield, New South Wales, Australia 2070.

ISBN 978-0-545-46023-1

Text and graphics copyright © 2000 by Emily Rodda
Deltora Quest concept and characters copyright © Emily Rodda
Deltora Quest is a registered trademark of Rin Pty Ltd.
Cover illustrations copyright © 2000 by Scholastic Australia
Cover illustrations by Marc McBride
Graphics by Kate Rowe
Cover design by Natalie Sousa
First published by Scholastic Australia Pty Limited

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, by arrangement with Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Australia.

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 12 13 14 15 16 17/0

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing, June 2012

1 - Flight

It seemed to Lief that they had been walking beside the river forever. Yet only one night and part of a day had passed since he, Barda, and Jasmine had left the City of the Rats in flames. The faint smell of smoke hung in the still air, though the city was now just a blur on the horizon at their backs.

They had long ago discarded the heavy red garments and boots which had saved them from the rats. Walking was easier now. But hunger and exhaustion were making the journey seem endless, and the fact that the landscape never changed did not help. Hour by hour the companions had trudged over bare, baked earth hemmed in on both sides by the waters of Broad River — waters so wide that they could barely see the far banks.

Though all of them badly needed rest, they knew that they had to keep moving. The plume of smoke

staining the blue sky at their backs was like a signal to their enemies. It was a sign that something of great importance had happened in the terrible place where the third stone of the Belt of Deltora had been hidden. Should the Shadow Lord become aware that the stone had been taken, his servants would begin searching for the thieves.

And how easily they would find them on this bare plain.

Barda plodded beside Lief, his head lowered. Jasmine walked a little ahead. Now and then she murmured to Filli, who was nestled on her shoulder, but her eyes were fixed on the horizon. She was watching for Kree, the raven. Kree had flown off as dawn broke to survey the land ahead and to look for food.

He had been away for many hours. This boded ill for them. It meant that food and shelter were far distant. But there was nothing to do but keep moving. There was no direction to take but the one they were taking, for the Plain of the Rats lay in a bend of the river, and was bounded on three sides by deep water.

For centuries the rats have been trapped by the river that curves around their plain, thought Lief grimly. And now we are trapped also.

Suddenly Jasmine gave a high, piercing cry. A faint, harsh sound came back in answer.

Lief looked up, and saw a black speck coming towards them through the distant blue. With every

moment the speck grew larger, and at last Kree was soaring down, squawking harshly.

He landed on Jasmine's arm and squawked again. Jasmine listened, expressionless. Finally she turned to Lief and Barda.

"Kree says that the plain ends in a broad band of water that is almost as wide as the river itself," she said.

"What?" Appalled, Lief slumped to the ground.

"The plain is an island?" growled Barda. "But it cannot be!" He sat down beside Lief, with a heavy sigh.

Kree ruffled his feathers, and made an annoyed, clucking sound.

"Kree has seen it with his own eyes," snapped Jasmine. "A bar of water joins the two arms of the river. It is very broad, he says, but perhaps not too deep for us to wade. It seemed paler in color than the river, and he could see schools of fish not far from the surface."

"Fish!" Lief's mouth watered at the thought of hot food.

"How far?" he heard Barda ask.

Jasmine shrugged. "Kree thinks that we could reach it by tomorrow, if we move on through the night."

"Then so we will," Barda said grimly, hauling himself to his feet. "At least we cannot easily be seen

in the dark. And we have no food, after all. We have no shelter, or anything to sleep upon but the bare earth. So what comfort is there in stopping? We might as well walk till we drop."

✳

So it was that in the pale dawn of the following day they found themselves at the end of the plain, staring, with eyes that prickled with weariness, at a gleaming sheet of water that blocked their path.

"Surely this is not a natural channel," Lief said. "The banks are too straight and even."

"It was dug by human hands," Barda agreed. "Long ago, I would guess, as a barrier against the rats."

Kree soared above them, squawking excitedly.

"On the other side there are trees," murmured Jasmine. "Trees and other growing things."

Without hesitation she stepped into the water, her eyes fixed eagerly on the ragged line of green ahead.

"Jasmine, take care!" Lief called after her. But Jasmine waded on without pausing or turning. The water rose to her waist, then to her chest, but no further. She began moving steadily towards the opposite shore.

Barda and Lief hastened after her, splashing into the cool stream. "When it was my task to keep you out of trouble on the streets of Del, Lief, I thought that you

were the most impulsive, troublesome young pest in creation," muttered Barda. "I apologize. Jasmine is just as bad — or worse!"

Lief grinned, then jumped and yelled as something brushed softly against his ankle. He looked down into the water and saw a flurry of sudden movement as several large fish darted away into the shadows.

"They will not hurt you," called Jasmine, without turning around.

"How do you know?" Lief called back. "They could be feeling as hungry as I am. They — "

He broke off as Kree cried out and plummeted towards them, skimming the surface of the water and then soaring up into the air again.

Jasmine stopped, alert, then swung around to face Lief and Barda. "Something is coming from the sky!" she called. "Kree — "

Screeching, the black bird dived towards them once more. Plainly he was terrified.

"What is it?" Frantically, Lief scanned the sky, but could see nothing.

"Something huge! Something very bad!" Jasmine snatched Filli from her shoulder and held him up into the air, a tiny bundle of grey fur, chattering with fear. "Kree!" she shrieked, "Take Filli! Hide him, and yourself!"

And at that moment Lief's straining eyes caught

sight of a black spot on the horizon. It was growing larger by the moment. In seconds Lief could make out a long neck and huge, beating wings.

"Ak-Baba!" hissed Barda. "It has seen the smoke."

Lief's blood seemed to chill in his veins. His father had told him of the Ak-Baba — giant, vulture-like birds that lived a thousand years. Seven of them were the servants of the Shadow Lord. It was they who had carried the gems from the Belt of Deltora to their perilous hiding places.

Obeying Jasmine's command, Kree had snatched up Filli in his claws and was speeding with him to the other side of the band of water. There they could both conceal themselves in the long grass or shelter in a tree.

But Lief, Barda, and Jasmine had nowhere to hide. Behind them was the bare earth of the plain. Before them was a huge sweep of water, glittering in the dawn.

They floundered forward a few steps, but all of them knew it was no use. The Ak-Baba was flying with incredible speed. It would be upon them long before they could reach safety.

Already it could see the smoke of the burning city. When it saw three ragged strangers escaping from the plain it would know at once that they were enemies of the Shadow Lord.

Would it attack them? Or would it simply plunge down, snatch them up in its huge talons, and carry them away to its master? Either way, they were doomed.

The only possible hiding place was under the water. And yet Lief knew that this was no hiding place at all. From the air, the Ak-Baba would be able to see them as clearly as Kree had seen the schools of fish.

"It has not seen us yet," Barda said rapidly. "Its eyes are fixed on the smoke from the city. Lief — your cloak!"

Of course! With wet, clumsy fingers Lief pulled at the strings that fastened his cloak around his throat. At last the cloak floated free.

"Down!" Barda hissed.

All of them took a deep breath and sank below the surface of the stream, holding the cloak over them like a canopy. It drifted above their heads, almost invisible in the water.

They had done their best. But was their best good enough to hide them from the sharp eyes of the Ak-Baba? If it had been dusk, perhaps. But surely, in this bright dawn light, the beast could not fail to notice that one patch of water looked a little different from the rest. Suspicious, it would circle above the place, watching, waiting . . .

And for how long could Lief, Barda, and Jasmine

hold their breath? Sooner or later they would have to rise, gasping, to the surface. Then the monster would strike.

Lief's fingers felt for the clasp of the Belt he wore under his shirt. The Belt of Deltora must not be captured with him. If necessary, he would unloose it and let it fall into the mud at the bottom of the stream. It would be better for it to lie there than for it to fall into the hands of the Shadow Lord again.

Already his lungs felt tight. Already his body was telling him to rise to the surface and breathe. Something nudged at his shoulder and he opened his eyes. Fish were moving all around him — big silver fish, their glassy eyes staring. Their fins and tails buffeted his head and face. They were closing in on him, crowding him.

Then, suddenly, it grew dark. A huge shadow was blocking out the sun.

The Ak-Baba was overhead.