

Deltora Quest



THE VALLEY OF THE LOST

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1 - Night Terrors

It was dark and very still. Lief, Barda, and Jasmine slipped through the night like shadows, and the River Tor slid beside them, keeping its secrets.

They had decided that for safety's sake they should not travel by day. But the night held its own perils, for they did not dare to use a torch to light their way, and the moon was shrouded in cloud. As the darkness cloaked them, so also would it cloak a prowling enemy.

And it hid more than that. It hid holes, rocks, and ditches. It hid trees, bushes, and landmarks. Every step was a step into the unknown.

They knew that somewhere ahead there was a bridge. When they reached it they could at last cross the river that had caused them so much grief. Then

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they could begin moving towards the Valley of the Lost, where lay the great diamond, the seventh gem of the Belt of Deltora.

But in this blackness how easy it would be to pass the bridge unaware! So, though all of them loathed the very thought of the River Tor, they stayed close beside it, knowing that its dark waters must lead them to their goal at last.

With one hand Lief gripped the Belt of Deltora, hidden under his clothes. But the Belt, for all its power, could not help him as his eyes strained to penetrate the darkness ahead.

"It is not far now," Jasmine whispered suddenly.

Lief saw a faint, pale blur as her face turned to him. Filli, curled inside her jacket, made a small, sleepy sound. Kree was silent and invisible on her shoulder, his black feathers swallowed by the darkness.

"Do you see it?" asked Barda.

"No," Jasmine breathed. "But I smell people and animals, and the bridge was just beyond a village, remember?"

They crept forward, and at last found themselves moving through cleared ground. Lief thought he could make out the thicker blackness of a wall rising to his left.

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Perhaps armed villagers on night watch stood behind the wall, listening for danger. Perhaps this was why the village still stood, despite the pirates that sailed the Tor's waters and the bandits that prowled its banks.

If they heard a sound, the guards would investigate. They would strike instantly, without pity. They would have learned from sad examples all along the river that to hesitate was to risk losing everything.

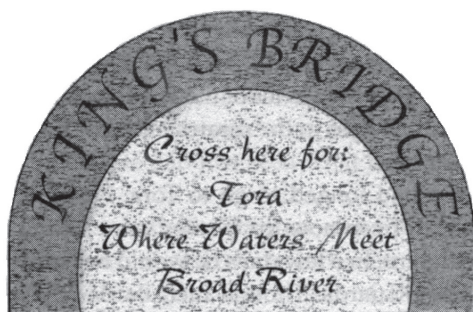
The companions moved on, treading lightly, scarcely breathing. No sooner had they reached the safety of a grove of trees beyond the wall, when the clouds covering the moon parted and the ground was flooded with light.

Jasmine caught her breath. "We were fortunate," she murmured. "If that had happened just a moment earlier . . ."

Barda nudged Lief's arm and pointed ahead. Through the trees Lief saw the bridge. It was very close, peaceful in the moonlight. A small herd of long-haired goats clustered around it, some standing, some resting on the grass.

The bridge was solid and broad enough to take a cart. A large sign stood beside it. The sign's lettering was faded, but Lief could still make out the words.

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Lief's heart thumped. Tora! The great city of the west, so loyal to the kings and queens of Deltora. The ideal hiding place for the heir to the throne.

Tora must be near. But there had been no sign of a city as they followed the river down to the coast just days ago. At the time, Lief had thought little of it. He had too many other things to worry about. Now, however, it seemed very strange indeed. For surely Tora was set on the River Tor. Its very name made a link.

"Tora must be set well back from the river," muttered Barda, whose thoughts had plainly been running on the same lines. "But it is odd that we did not see it in the distance, at least."

Lief nodded, still puzzling over the mystery. "Perhaps we passed it at night, and it keeps no lights. In any case, we may yet be able to visit it — on our way to the Valley of the Lost."

"By all reports, we would be advised not to do any such thing, at least until the Belt is complete," hissed Jasmine. "Dain was warned —"

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She broke off, biting her lip, and Lief and Barda were also silent. Memories of the boy they had last seen bound and helpless in the pirates' coastal cave flooded all their minds.

Dain had longed to go to Tora. Now he would never see it. Even now the pirates were sailing up the river with him. In a few days he would be handed over to the Grey Guards. Though Lief, Barda, and Jasmine knew they could not save him, his sad and frightened eyes haunted them all.

The boy would try his best to escape. But what hope did he have against a gang of armed ruffians greedy for the Shadow Lord's gold?

Jasmine tossed her head as if to shake away unwelcome thoughts, and turned her attention to the goats by the bridge. "We will have to move slowly, so as not to startle the beasts," she said. "If they make a sound, all is lost."

"They must be used to people." Lief stared at the goats, at the small horns gleaming, the long, smooth hair. "But we should show ourselves to them now, while the moon shines. We will frighten them if we come at them in the dark."

He took a single step forward, then stopped abruptly, his eyes widening. One of the goats — there was something wrong with one of the goats! Its body seemed to be rippling, billowing outward like a ballooning sail.

Lief blinked rapidly. What trick of the moonlight

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was this? Now that he looked again, the goat was exactly as before. Yet — he felt Barda grip his arm, saw another of the goats quiver and alter, head stretching upward, body shuddering, before returning to its normal shape. Then he knew. He had just seen what Dain had called the Tremor.

“Ols!” he breathed. “They are not goats at all, but Ols!” His stomach turned over as he realized how nearly they had walked into the midst of the herd, all unsuspecting. How nearly they had met their deaths.

“They are guarding the bridge.” Barda gritted his teeth in frustration. “What will we do?”

“One of us must lead them away, so that the other two can slip across,” said Jasmine. “I will — ”

Barda shook his head firmly. “There are far too many of them for that trick to work, Jasmine. Some will give chase, some will stay. And now I come to think of it, there were many water birds roosting on the other side of the bridge when I passed it on my way to the coast. More Ols, no doubt, though I did not realize it at the time. And surely they will be there still.”

“Then we must go on,” muttered Lief. “Move around the bridge, so that the Ols do not see us. Find another way across the river, farther upstream.”

“But there *is* no other way!” hissed Jasmine. “I cannot swim, you know that. And even if I could, the killer worms — ”

“We cannot swim, but there are such things as

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boats," Barda broke in calmly. "We have money to pay for a crossing. Or we will make a raft. Anything would be better than fighting twenty Ols."

As silently as they had come, they crept away from the river and continued upstream, making a wide arc around the bridge. Now and then, through gaps in the trees, they caught glimpses of the goats still waiting, unmoving, in the moonlight.



When dawn broke, the sun struggling to shine through a blanket of cloud, the village and the bridge were far behind them. They stopped to eat and rest, huddling together beneath a group of ragged bushes. Kree took flight, to catch insects and stretch his cramped wings.

Lief had first watch. He wrapped his cloak around him and tried to make himself comfortable. His eyes were prickling, but he was not afraid that he would fall asleep. His body was jumping with nerves.

Time crawled by. Kree returned, and went to roost low in one of the bushes. Sulky dawn gave way to dull morning. Clouds hung low above Lief's head, thickening by the moment. We will have rain, he thought dismally. Scuttling animals had made narrow paths through the greenery, but there were no animals to be seen now, and for this Lief was grateful. Every living thing was suspect, in a place where Ols prowled.

And Doom claimed that there were Ols who

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could take the form of things that were not living — Grade 3 Ols, the perfection of the Shadow Lord's evil art. If the tale was true, and such beings really existed, the very bush on which Kree perched, or the pebble at Lief's feet, could be a secret enemy. At any moment a horrible transformation could begin. At any moment a white, flickering specter with the Shadow Lord's mark in its core could rise and overwhelm them.

Nowhere was safe. Nothing could be trusted.

Lief licked his lips, fought down the dread that clutched his heart. But still his flesh seemed to tremble on his bones. He slipped his hands under his shirt and felt for the Belt of Deltora, heavy at his waist. His fingers moved to the sixth stone, the amethyst. As they rested upon it, as its magic flowed through him, the trembling slowly ebbed.

Somehow we will find a boat, he told himself. We will cross the river. Our quest will continue. We will survive.

But still he could not rid himself of the feeling that they were caught in a net. A net that the Shadow Lord was slowly, slowly drawing in.