



# THE SHADOWLANDS

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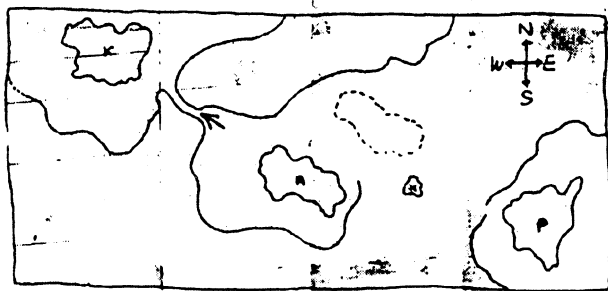
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## 1 - The Forbidden Way

The narrow channel through the rock disappeared into thick darkness, echoing with the hollow sound of lapping water. A broad band of bright pink and yellow seaweed floated across its entrance.

Lief had no need to consult the little map in his hand to know that this grim tunnel was the Forbidden Way — the only path to the island of Keras, and the third part of the Pirran Pipe. But still he looked down at the map and the arrow drawn by the Piper of Auron.



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The map had been soaked, marked, and damaged, but against all odds it had survived. Like us, Lief thought, looking up at Jasmine and Barda.

They were both sitting very still, staring at the dark crack in the rock. They no longer had to squint against stinging spray. The Auron guards who were towing the boat had ordered their great eels to slow.

Because Auron boats were narrow, with no room for two to sit side by side, Barda was alone on the central seat, holding the boat's single paddle. Jasmine was at the front of the boat with Kree, whose injured wing was still weak, perched on her shoulder and Filli chattering beneath her collar. Lief was in the back.

"Once we are in that tunnel, there will be no turning back," Barda muttered. "We will have to stay alert."

Lief nodded. Certainly, Doran the Dragonlover, the first explorer of Deltora's underworld, had passed through the Forbidden Way. But that had been hundreds of years ago. Many things might have changed since then.

As the boat's prow nudged the first strands of bright weed, the Auron guards released their hold and moved away. Only Penn, the Auron history-keeper, stayed close beside the boat, speaking softly to the giant eel on whose neck she was perched.

The guards were wild and fearsome, with their clothes of animal skin and wicked bone spears. But they would not cross that bright weed barrier, the an-

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cient Auron warning of danger, unless ordered to do so by their leader, the Piper. And no such order had been given.

"We will give you a boat and guide you to the edge of our territory, but we can help you no farther," the Piper had told Lief, Barda, and Jasmine as they ate their final meal in Penn's little hut. "No Auron may enter the Forbidden Way."

"It is our most ancient law," added Penn, anxious to soften the Piper's bluntness. "Should Aurons enter their sea, the Kerons would attack."

"The Plume people said the same of you," Jasmine remarked lightly. "They said you would kill us on sight."

"The Plumes are lying savages!" snapped the Piper, his eyes sparks of pale fire in his wrinkled face.

Lief and Barda glanced ruefully at each other. They knew that there was no point in defending the Plumes. The old hatred between the Pirran tribes was too strong to be shaken by the arguments of three strangers.

But Jasmine was looking at the two fighting spiders, sleeping peacefully together in their new, large cage. United by fear of a common enemy, Flash and Fury had put aside their bitter rivalry and now wrestled only in play. As a result, they were to stay with Penn, who had grown quite fond of them despite their fearsome looks.

"Even Flash and Fury have decided they have

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more in common than they thought," Jasmine said. "But the Plumes, Aurons, and Kerons cling to their bitterness. It is hard to believe that once you were all Pirrans."

"That was long ago," muttered the Piper. "Pirra is the Shadowlands now, and the Plumes and Kerons are to blame. If they had accepted the lady Auron as Piper, the Pirran Pipe would never have been divided, and the Shadow Lord would not have been able to take our land."

Penn's brow creased. She, at least, was clear-sighted enough to admit to herself that the followers of Auron had been just as stubborn as the followers of Auron's rivals, Plume and Keras. The three groups had shared equally in the rash decision to divide the Pirran Pipe.

Now, as the boat rocked gently in the swell caused by the coiling of the great eels, Lief looked up at Penn's anxious face.

The history-keeper had insisted on accompanying them as far as the Forbidden Way, carrying the fire that would light their torches. She had been cheerful on the journey through the rainbow sea, but now her fears showed clearly in her eyes.

Holding her flare high, she urged her eel to the front of the boat and lit Jasmine's torch. Then, silently, she moved back to Lief.

"Farewell, Penn," Lief said. "Thank you for all you have done for us."

"I have done nothing," Penn answered, dipping the flare till it touched the torch Lief held up to her. "But what you have done for *us* can never be repaid. I pray that you —" She bowed her head, unable to continue.

"Never fear," said Barda heartily. "We will live to share Molisk patties with you again, Penn."

"I hope it will be so," Penn whispered. "May Auron protect you."

She murmured to her eel, which obediently moved behind the boat and nudged it forward. The boat slipped over the band of weed and into the mouth of the tunnel.

At once, Lief's mind filled with the sweet, piercing music of the Pirran Pipe. The sound was so loud, so overwhelming, that it seemed to him that Barda and Jasmine must surely be able to hear it, too. But he could see by their faces that they could not.

He stared, transfixed, into the darkness ahead. His mouth was dry, his head ringing with sound. Dimly he realized that he was clutching the cloth bag that hung around his neck, under his shirt. There the mouthpiece and stem of the Pipe lay hidden.

The last piece of the Pipe was calling to them out of the darkness. Calling . . .

*Stop this! You must be alert, be ready . . .*

Lief forced his hand over the side of the boat, scooped up some water, and dashed it into his face. He gasped as the icy liquid splashed on his hot skin.

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The spell was broken. The music faded away, leaving a strange, sad emptiness behind it. Lief blinked rapidly as his eyes cleared.

The light was dimming rapidly. The walls of the passage were racing by. Lief twisted in his seat to look behind him, and was startled to see that the passage entrance was already just a narrow slit of light in the distance.

"What is happening?" Jasmine exclaimed. "Why are we going so fast?"

"Some sort of current is pulling us along," Barda called uneasily. "I am hardly paddling at all, and yet . . ."

"It is the Pipe," Lief managed to say. "I — feel it."

In moments the boat was skimming along in darkness, the passage walls lit only by the flickering yellow light of the torches.

The walls flashed with rainbow colors, which soon gave way to purest green. But above, where the torchlight did not reach, there was only thick black.

Suddenly Kree squawked as Jasmine jerked in her seat and slapped at her neck. "Something just fell on me," Jasmine exclaimed.

"A moth, no doubt," said Barda, concentrating on steering the boat as it raced along. "I have seen a few of them around."

Then he slapped at his own neck. Something had fallen onto the skin there, and was clinging.

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Lief felt a tickling on his hand. He looked down and saw a winged, slug-like creature squirming there. He shook his hand, but the creature did not fall away. With a start, he realized that it was biting him — burrowing its head into his flesh.

And it was growing. Its body was swelling as he watched. Filling with his blood.

“Leeches!” he shouted, shaking his hand again, filled with disgust.

He saw Kree fluttering from Jasmine’s shoulder as she scrabbled at the collar of her jacket, trying to pull off two leeches that were hanging from her neck. He saw with horror that more of the loathsome creatures had already landed on her hands.

“Beware! Above!” shouted Barda.

Lief looked, and his stomach heaved. The air high above them was teeming with flying leeches, streaming in thick, whirring clouds down from the darkness.

Wildly he waved the torch above his head. Dozens of slimy, winged bodies sizzled in the flames. But still many of the leeches swerved around the fiery barrier to settle on his hands and arms, to feed and swell.

And these were only the forerunners. Thousands upon thousands were following, spiralling downward.

“Jasmine, Barda! Get down!” Lief shouted. Recklessly he cast his torch into the water, then tore off his

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cloak and threw it across the boat to make a canopy.

In moments the companions were lying face down beneath the cloak, holding it awkwardly in place. A pattering sound began as the first cloud of leeches rained down on their shelter, sensing the warm bodies beneath it. The pattering increased, became a relentless pounding. The cloak began to sag.

Lief's arms and hands were trembling with the effort of holding the cloak in place. The leeches that had been clinging to him before he took shelter, and the few that had found a way to creep under the cloak since then, were hanging like bloated sausages from his wrists and the backs of his hands. He gritted his teeth, forcing down the wild, urgent need to pluck them off.

The loaded cloak began pulling away from the boat's edge. Panic-stricken, Lief heaved at the fabric, trying to tug it back into place. But already leeches were pouring through the tiny gap, fastening onto his hands, slithering into his sleeve.

The cloak bulged and slipped again. The gap at the side of the boat opened further. Leeches poured through in a whirring mass.

We are finished, Lief thought suddenly. After all we have been through, we are lost — defeated by the smallest creatures we have ever faced.

It would have been almost funny, if it had not been so vile.

Even as his hands struggled hopelessly to close

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the gap, his mind flew to Del. He would never return. Marilen's worst fears had come to pass.

Yet I regret nothing, Lief thought. I did what I had to do.

A strange peace flowed through him. And with that peace came the music of the Pirran Pipe, piercing him with its exquisite sweetness.

At last, Lief surrendered himself to it. He let himself drift in the tides of sound. His eyes closed.

And so it was that he did not notice that emerald light was suddenly shining through the fabric above his head. He did not notice that the drumming, pounding sound had ceased. He did not hear the soft splash of water as the boat skimmed lightly across a rippling green sea, drawn safely and surely to land.