



**THE
SISTER OF
THE SOUTH**

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1 - Bad Tidings

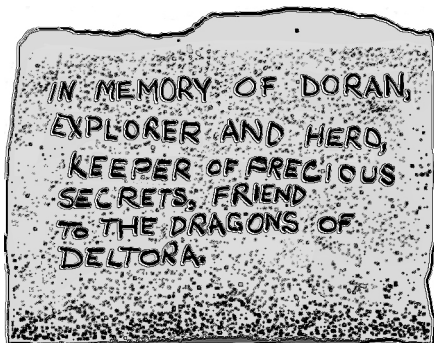
The grave of Doran the Dragonlover contained only his silver flask and a strange, gleaming, many-colored stone. These ancient objects were all that remained of Deltora's greatest explorer.

The grave was in as wild a place as Doran could have wished — looking over the windswept rock that pointed to the Isle of the Dead, where the Sister of the West had been destroyed.

Lief, Barda, and Jasmine stood at the graveside. With them were Ava the fortune-teller and Red Han, the lost keeper of the Bone Point Light. There were also two dragons — Veritas, dragon of the amethyst, and the orphaned baby dragon of the diamond, who was as yet unnamed. And it was these two, Lief thought, whose presence would have pleased Doran the most.

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After careful thought, Veritas had scratched the lettering upon the grave marker.



"It is fitting that we used his true name," Veritas said quietly. "For dragons, to know a true name is to have power over that name's owner. But Dragonfriend is at peace. Nothing can harm him now."

As Lief turned away from the grave, his heart was very full. He knew that the many-colored stone was Doran's soul-stone, filled with the great explorer's memories. When Lief had placed it in its final resting place, his mind had been flooded with pictures.

Wild and beautiful places. Thousands of faces. The secret seas of the underworld. Flying with dragons . . .

And through it all ran Doran's voice, whispering in a strange language. Whispering, it seemed, of Veritas.

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Veritas hopian forta fortuna fidelis honora joyeu . . .
Veritas hopian forta fortuna fidelis honora joyeu . . .

No doubt Veritas would know what the words meant, but Lief could not ask. The soul-stone had shown him the secrets of Doran's heart. He felt he had no right to speak of them.

"You were always in Doran's mind, I think," he contented himself with saying to the grieving dragon, when it, too, turned from the grave.

"As he will always be in mine," said Veritas. "That is why, though I long to return to my own territory, I will stay here for a time. The diamond infant must be taught to know her own land and the ways of dragons. Dragonfriend would have wished it."



An hour later, the companions set off along the broad coast road, with Red Han striding eagerly before them, and their horses, Honey, Bella, and Swift, trotting no less eagerly behind.

Kree had left hours earlier, carrying a message for Zeean that all was well, that Red Han had been found, and that the companions and the lighthouse keeper wished to be sped to Tora.

Plainly the message had been safely delivered, for already the travelers could feel the faint tug of Toran magic. By nightfall they would be in the white city of the west.

There, Red Han would find the help he needed to return to Bone Point, where he longed to be. And

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there Lief, Barda, and Jasmine and the horses would find food, rest, and then safe, quick passage to Del, their final goal.

"How I long for a hot bath and a comfortable bed!" Barda exclaimed.

"It is fresh fruit I long for," sighed Jasmine, and Filli, riding on her shoulder, chattered fervent agreement.

The magic strengthened, and they began to move faster. Crisp, salty wind beat against their faces. They exclaimed and pointed at the seabirds swooping over the waves close to shore, feasting on the tiny fish that swarmed just below the sparkling surface.

Only twenty-four hours had passed since the destruction of the Sister of the West, but already the land and sea were coming to life.

So it will be in Del, Lief thought. So it will be in the whole of the south, if we can find the last Sister.

Plainly Jasmine's thoughts had been running along the same lines.

"I cannot think where the Sister of the South might be hidden in a bustling place like Del," she said. "Could it be buried deep on the shore, perhaps?"

"It is hard to imagine it." Barda frowned. "At the time the Sister was hidden, Del harbor was a busy port — always crowded with boats and people."

"I was thinking of the maze of drain tunnels beneath the city," Lief said.

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"Of course!" Barda's face lit up. "One of those tunnels begins in the palace. Doom knows of it — has even used it. It would have been simple for the Shadow Lord servant Drumm, the king's chief advisor in those days, to creep out through that tunnel and put the Sister somewhere in the maze."

"And easy for him, and all the chief advisors who followed him, to visit it in secret and protect it," Lief added.

"But there are no longer chief advisors in the palace," Jasmine put in. "Who protects the Sister now?"

"Indeed," Barda said heavily. "Who is the new guardian? It could be anyone. Del is a large place."

"It is," Lief said. "But very few people in it have any way of finding out where we are or what we are doing. Yet time and again the Shadow Lord has known where to find us."

"That may have nothing to do with the guardian of the south," Barda said. "I have begun to wonder whether something we are carrying helps the Enemy track us. I suggest we leave our packs — even our garments — behind us when we depart for Del."

Lief nodded agreement. He was remembering Ava's voice hissing in his ear as he bid her farewell.

"Beware, Lief of Del!" the blind fortune-teller had whispered. "You might have faced the Kobb of the Isle of the Dead and survived, but I see creeping

darkness in your future. The way upon which you have set your feet leads to disaster. Heed my warning, and turn aside from it!"

"I cannot do that, Ava," Lief had said gently.

And Ava had stumped away from him in anger, muttering and hunching her shoulders.

Jasmine's voice broke into Lief's thoughts. "We have almost reached the border," she cried. "Soon we will be caught in the magic of Tora, and we will fly!"



In Tora, a great crowd was waiting to greet them. The horses were led away to be cared for. Red Han was escorted to the feast that had been prepared. And soon Lief, Barda, and Jasmine were alone in the great marble square with only Zeean, Marilen, Ranesh, and Manus the Ralad man.

Surprised, Lief looked around for his mother.

"Sharn returned to Del," Zeean said quietly. "It seems that the city is being besieged by a golden dragon. The people are arming themselves and demanding that the dragon be hunted down."

"No!" Lief exclaimed in horror. "The dragon of the topaz must not be harmed!"

"Sharn seemed to know that," said Manus, his black eyes grave. "She believed she could calm the people. She left for Del the moment she heard the news — the same day we heard that you were safe in the Sleeping Dunes. But —"

"But what?" Lief cried, in a fever of impatience.

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"You must prepare yourself for a shock, Lief," Zeean said bluntly. "Almost as soon as she arrived at the palace, Sharn fell ill. And I fear it is no ordinary illness. It is a deadly infection, now spreading very fast through the city. Your mother still lives, but hundreds of others in Del have died."

Lief stared, aghast. Jasmine put her arm around him.

"Does not the diamond in the Belt of Deltora protect from pestilence?" she said. "And it gives strength, as well. Never fear, Lief. Sharn will recover as soon as you reach her, I am sure of it."

"What is this illness?" Barda demanded. "Does it have a name?"

Zeean's lips tightened. "It has been *given* a name," she said curtly. "Because Sharn was the first to fall ill, your people appear to believe that she was the one who carried the disease to Del. They are calling it the Toran Plague."

She thrust two notes into Lief's hands. "The bird Ebony brought the one from Doom an hour ago," she said. "The other came on the day Sharn left us."

"It is from Josef, by the hand," Ranesh muttered. "He is becoming more and more desperate. I should go to him, but —"

"But your place is with your wife, who is with child and needs you," Zeean broke in. "Josef has more than enough people to tend to him."

She turned to Lief, Barda, and Jasmine. "Manus

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and I must go," she said. "Red Han wishes to go to Bone Point at once, so the Light can shine this very night. Food awaits you in the dining hall, and your chambers have been prepared. Rest well."

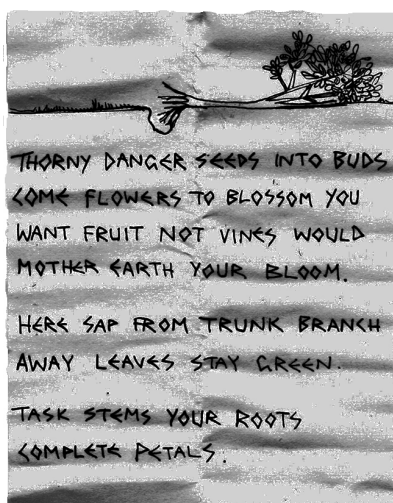
She swept away, her back very straight, with Manus trotting after her.

"Zeean grieves for Sharn. And it hurts her that Tora is being blamed for the plague," Marilen said in her soft voice.

"Ah yes," said Ranesh drily. "For, of course, only good can come from Tora."

Marilen glanced at him. "Let us go and fetch food from the dining hall," she murmured. "Our friends will prefer to eat in a quiet place, I am sure."

The moment Marilen and Ranesh were gone, Lief opened Doom's note.



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Slowly, following the code, Lief read out each sentence backwards, leaving out all words that had anything to do with plants.

“Your mother would not want you to come into danger. Stay away from here. Complete your task.”

Barda gave a mirthless laugh. “To complete our task, we *must* go to Del. But, of course, Doom does not know that.”

Slowly Lief opened the second, older note — the note from Josef.

Lief—I seize this chance to write again—must beg your pardon for troubling you. I long to talk to you—see you—you have much to do, however—urgent matters to attend to. Forgive me—fearful old Josef—news of you will come soon no doubt. Keep well—tell your companions the same—no one misses you all more than I do.

Josef

P.S. So many dashes! They show my state of mind. I pray you will understand. The message, after all, comes from my heart.

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Frowning, Lief passed the paper to Barda and Jasmine.

"His mind is failing, I fear," Barda said, after a moment.

Lief sighed. It seemed that Barda was right. And yet . . .

"Someone has read this before us!" Jasmine exclaimed, tapping the note. "Look! There are two sets of fold lines on the paper. It has been opened, then folded again in haste."

"That is no mystery," said Barda. "I have no doubt that Doom reads every note sent from the palace, in case it might be helpful to a spy."

"Then he wasted his time with this," Jasmine said, handing the letter back to Lief. "It says nothing at all."

Lief read the note again. He could not rid himself of the feeling that there was something strange about it. The words seemed hasty and confused. Yet the old librarian's handwriting was just as usual.

He glanced at the lines below the signature.

So many dashes! . . . I pray you will understand. The message, after all, comes from my heart . . .

Lief's skin prickled.

. . . dashes . . . the message, after all . . .

Lief went back to the beginning of the note, but this time he read only those words that came after a dash.

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— I . . . — must . . . — see . . . — you . . . — urgent . . . — fearful . . . — news . . . — tell . . . — no one.

I must see you. Urgent. Fearful news. Tell no one.