

Deltora Quest



THE FORESTS OF SILENCE

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PART I: THE BELT OF DELTORA

1 - The King

Jarred stood unnoticed in the crowd thronging the great hall of the palace. He leaned against a marble pillar, blinking with tiredness and confusion.

It was midnight. He had been roused from his bed by shouts and bells. He had pulled on his clothes and joined the crowd of noble folk surging towards the hall.

"The king is dead," the people were whispering. "The young prince is to be crowned at once."

Jarred could hardly take it in. The king of Deltora, with his long, plaited beard and his golden robes, had died of the mysterious fever that had kept him to his bed for the last few weeks. Never again would his deep, booming voice be heard in the hallways of the palace. Never again would he sit laughing in the feasting hall.

King Alton was dead, like his wife, the queen,

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before him. The fever had taken them both. And now . . .

Now Endon will be king, Jarred thought. He shook his head, trying to make himself believe it. He and Endon had been friends since they were young children. But what a difference there was between them!

For Endon was the son of the king and queen, the prince of Deltora. And Jarred was the son of a trusted servant who had died in the king's service when Jarred was only four years old.

Jarred had been given to Endon as a companion, so that the young prince would not be lonely. They had grown up together, like brothers. Together they did their lessons in the schoolroom, teased the guards, and persuaded the cooks in the kitchens to give them treats. Together they played in the vast green gardens.

The other children who lived in the palace — the sons and daughters of nobles and servants — kept to their own rooms and their own parts of the grounds. As was the palace custom, Jarred and Endon never even saw them, except in the great hall on feast days. But the two boys did what they could to entertain themselves.

They had a secret hiding place — a huge, hollow tree near the palace gates. There they hid from fussy old Min, their nursemaid, and Prandine, the king's chief advisor, a tall, thin, sour man they both disliked.

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They practiced archery together, playing a game called "Aim High," where the first to shoot an arrow into the topmost fork of the hollow tree would win.

They invented a secret code and used it to pass messages, jokes, and warnings to each other under the noses of their teachers, Min or Prandine.

Jarred would be hiding in the hollow tree, for example, because Min wanted him to take a dose of the fish-oil medicine he detested. Endon would walk by, and drop a note where he could reach it.



DEL ONEL O TELGEL O TELO TEL
HELE KEL ITEL CEL HELE NEL SEL
MEL I NELI SEL TELHEL E RELE

The message looked like nonsense, and no one in the palace could guess the meaning if they picked up a note by accident. But the code was simple.

All you had to do to decode a message was write down all the letters in a line, leaving out "EL" wherever it appeared.

DONOTGOTOTHEKITCHENSMINISTHERE
Then you divided the letters into words that made sense.

DO NOT GO TO THE KITCHENS. MIN IS
THERE.



As Endon and Jarred grew older there was less time for games. Their days were filled with tasks and duties.

Much of their time was spent learning the Rule — the thousands of laws and customs by which the royal family lived. The Rule governed their lives.

They sat — Endon patiently and Jarred not so patiently — while their long hair was plaited and twined with golden cord, according to the Rule. They spent hours learning to hammer red-hot metal into swords and shields. The first king of Deltora had been a blacksmith and it was part of the Rule that his art should be continued.

Each late afternoon they had a precious hour of free time. The only thing they were not allowed to do was to climb the high wall that surrounded the palace gardens, or go through the gates to the city beyond. For the prince of Deltora, like the king and queen, never mingled with the ordinary people. This was an important part of the Rule.

It was a part that Jarred was sometimes tempted to break. But Endon, quiet, dutiful, and obedient, anxiously begged him not even to think of climbing the wall.

"It is forbidden," he would say. "And Prandine already fears that you are a bad influence on me, Jarred. He has told my father so. If you break the Rule you will be sent away. And I do not want that."

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Jarred did not want it, either. He knew he would miss Endon sorely. And where would he go if he had to leave the palace? It was the only home he had ever known. So he tamed his curiosity, and the city beyond the wall remained as much a mystery to him as it was to the prince.

The sound of the crystal trumpets broke into Jarred's thoughts. He turned, like everyone else, towards the back of the hall.

Endon was entering between two rows of royal guards in pale blue uniforms trimmed with gold.

Poor Endon, Jarred thought. He is grieving.

He wished that he could be beside his friend, to comfort him. But he had not been summoned. Instead, Chief Advisor Prandine stalked at Endon's right hand.

Jarred looked at Prandine with dislike. The advisor looked even taller and thinner than usual. He wore a long purple robe and carried what looked like a box covered by a gold cloth. As he walked, his head poked forward so that he looked like a great bird of prey.

Endon's eyes were shadowed with sadness and he looked very small and pale in his stiff silver jacket with its high, jewelled collar. But he held up his head bravely, as he had been taught to do.

All his life he had been trained for this moment. "When I die, you will be king, my son," his father had told him so many times. "Do not fail in your duty."

"I will not fail, Father," Endon would answer

him obediently. "I will do what is right, when the time comes."

But neither Jarred nor Endon had thought the time would come so soon. The king was so strong and healthy that it had seemed that he would live forever.

Endon had reached the front of the hall now, and was mounting the steps to the platform. When he had reached the top, he turned and faced the sea of faces.

"He is so young," a woman near Jarred breathed to her neighbor.

"Ssh," the neighbor warned. "He is the rightful heir." As she spoke, she glanced nervously in Jarred's direction. Jarred did not recognize her face, but he realized that she knew him and feared he might tell Endon that her friend had been disloyal. He looked away quickly.

But now the crystal trumpets were sounding again and a low, excited murmuring had begun in the crowd.

Prandine had put his burden down on a small table beside the throne. He was sweeping the gold cloth aside to reveal a glass box. He was opening the box and taking out something that shone and glittered.

The magic Belt of Deltora. The crowd gave a hissing sigh, and Jarred, too, caught his breath. He had heard about the Belt since his earliest childhood, but he had never seen it before.

And here it was, in all its beauty and mystery —

the ancient object that for thousands of years had kept Deltora safe from invasion by the evil Shadow Lord who ruled beyond the Mountains.

Hanging between Prandine's bony fingers, the Belt seemed as delicate as lace, and the seven huge gems set along its length looked like beautiful decorations. But Jarred knew that the Belt was made of the strongest steel, and that each of the gems played its own special part in the magic that protected Deltora.

There was the topaz, symbol of faithfulness, gold as the setting sun. There was the amethyst, symbol of truth, purple as the violets that grew by the banks of the river Del. For purity and strength there was the diamond, clear and sparkling as ice. For honor there was the emerald, green as lush grass. There was the lapis lazuli, the heavenly stone, midnight blue with pinpoints of silver like the night sky. There was the ruby for happiness, red as blood. And the opal, symbol of hope, sparkling with all the colors of the rainbow.

The crowd seemed to hold its breath as Prandine bent to loop the Belt around Endon's waist. The advisor's fingers fumbled with the fastening, and he was standing well back. He almost seems afraid, Jarred thought curiously. I wonder why?

Then, suddenly, the fastening snapped closed, and his question was answered. Prandine sprang backwards, there was a crackling sound, and, at the same moment, the Belt seemed to explode with light.

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The gems blazed like fire, lighting the hall with their rainbow brilliance. The people cried out and turned away, hiding their eyes.

Endon stood with his arms upraised, almost hidden by the flashing, darting light. No longer was he just a young boy with sad eyes. The magic Belt had recognized him as the true heir to the throne of Del-tora. He, and he alone, could now use its mystery, magic, and power.

But *will* Endon use them? Jarred thought suddenly. Did his father use them? Did his father ever do anything but follow rules laid down ages ago?

He watched as the fires of the gems slowly died to a winking glow. He watched as the young king took off the Belt and handed it to Prandine. He watched as Prandine, smiling now, put it back into its glass case.

Jarred knew what would happen to the Belt now. As the Rule stated, it would be carried back to the top-most room of the palace tower. The door of the room would be locked with three gold locks. Three guards in gold uniforms would be put outside the door.

And then . . . life would go on as before. Prandine and the other government officials would make all the real decisions affecting the kingdom.

The king would attend ceremonies and feasts, laugh at the clowns and acrobats in the great hall, practice archery and the blacksmith's art. He would sit for hours while his hair, and, one day, his beard

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were plaited. He would sign endless documents and stamp them with the ring that bore the royal seal. He would follow the Rule.

In a few years he would marry a young woman chosen for him by Prandine. A daughter of one of the noble families, who had also spent her life inside the palace walls. They would have a child, to take Endon's place when he died. And that child would also wear the Belt only once, before it was again locked away.

Now, for the first time in his life, Jarred wondered if this was a good idea. For the first time he wondered how and why the Belt was made. For the first time he began to doubt the wisdom of letting such a power for good remain idle in a tower room while the realm it was supposed to protect lay, unseen, outside high walls.

He slipped unnoticed out of the great hall and ran up the stairs to the palace library. This was another first for him. He had never loved study.

But there were things he needed to know. And the library was the only place he was likely to find them out.