

DRAGONS OF
DELTORA

SHADOWGATE

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For Reuben Jakeman

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1 - Warning

The people of Broome were dancing. The music was loud. The floorboards of the great hall shook beneath the pounding of hundreds of feet.

Outside, it was dark. Cold wind moaned around the city walls, and waves crashed on the shore. But inside the great hall, all was warmth and light.

The people had much to celebrate.

King Lief, with his companions, Jasmine and Barda, had been in Broome for ten full days. That was a joy in itself. But there was something even better. During their stay, like a miracle, the barren land and the empty sea had come alive.

The fishing boats had begun hauling in fat fish. The hunters were bringing home meat almost every day. The crops were at last showing strong new shoots.

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Suddenly, the long time of hunger was over. There was new life everywhere. It was even said that a scarlet dragon had been sighted in the sea above Dragon's Nest!

The people of Broome did not know how or why this wonder had occurred. They simply rejoiced. And their rejoicing was at its height on this, the last night of their young king's visit.

Part of a spinning circle of dancers in the center of the hall, Lief looked as carefree as all the rest. But, in truth, his mind was on other things.

Only he, Barda, Jasmine, and their friend Lindal knew that the land was healing because the evil thing called the Sister of the East had been destroyed.

Only they knew that the journey the companions would begin at dawn was to end in Shadowgate. There the Sister of the North lay hidden, spreading its poison and singing its song of death and despair.

The music ended with a mighty clash of cymbals. At the same moment, Lief caught sight of Jasmine beckoning urgently from the door. Filli was perched on her shoulder, almost hidden by her tangled black hair.

Lief hurried towards them.

"We went out to get some air," Jasmine whispered as he reached her. "See what we found!"

They slipped outside. Perched on the veranda rail outside the hall, golden eyes gleaming in the light of a hanging lantern, were two black birds.

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Lief stared, startled. One of the birds was Kree, who was never far from Jasmine's side. But the other . . .

"Ebony!" he muttered.

Ebony was the most trusted of all the messenger birds Jasmine had trained. On their second day in Broome, Ebony had arrived with a message from Doom, demanding news. She had flown back to Del, bearing tidings as glad as Doom could wish.

Why had she returned so soon?

Jasmine held out the parchment she had taken from Ebony's leg. Lief recognized Doom's writing at once.



“Doom has gone mad,” said Jasmine. “Or . . . is he trying to write poetry? If so, he has no talent for it. This does not even rhyme.”

Lief grinned at the thought of Doom as a poet. “Poems do not have to rhyme,” he said. “But they do have to make a kind of sense. Doom has used a new code.”

“Well, I cannot make head nor tail of it,” Jasmine said flatly. “It seems just a lot of nonsense about birds.”

Lief frowned over the note. “Perhaps it is a warning to us to keep Kree safe,” he muttered. “Doom thinks someone drugged Kree’s water, the night he returned to Del. And he must be right. Kree remembers nothing of that night, or the following day.”

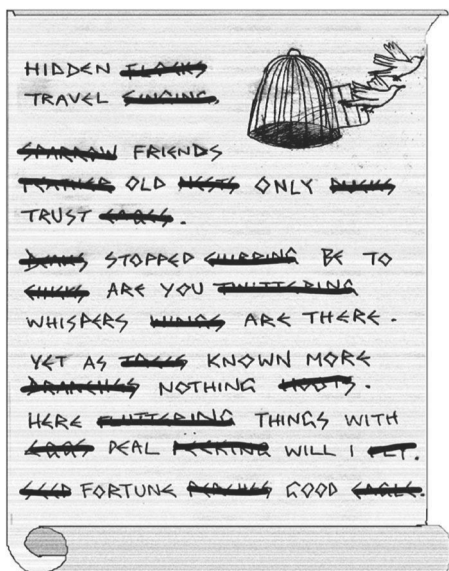
“I do not need a warning,” Jasmine snapped. “I do not need a drawing of birds being freed to remind me how lucky Kree was to escape death.”

An idea flashed into Lief’s mind. He scanned the message rapidly.

“Why, of course!” he exclaimed. “The picture is the clue. We must free the birds!”

He took the stub of a pencil from his pocket and crossed out some of the words in the message:

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"You see?" he said. "That is what the picture means. All the words that have anything to do with birds — 'flocks,' 'singing,' 'sparrow,' and so on — have to be taken out of the message before it can be read."

Jasmine began reading the new note. "'Hidden . . . travel. Friends . . . old . . . only . . . trust . . .'" — it still does not make sense!"

Then she saw the second small trick, and smiled. "Unless you read each sentence backwards!" she added.

Lief could not return her smile. Grimly, he spoke the words of the message aloud.

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“Travel hidden. Trust only old friends. There are whispers you are to be stopped. Nothing more known as yet. I will deal with things here. Good fortune.’ ”

Jasmine did not spend time wondering what had made her father send such a message. She concentrated on practical matters.

“It will not be easy to travel hidden,” she said. “Everyone knows we are touring the kingdom. Everywhere people will be watching, in case we come their way.”

“Indeed.” Lief was still staring at Doom’s note. “And the guardian of the Sister of the North among them, it seems. The Shadow Lord must have sensed that the Sister of the East is no more. He cannot know if we found the map fragment directing us to Shadowgate. But he is taking no chances.”

Jasmine slowly nodded agreement. “And plainly the guardian of the north has allies,” she said. “Doom has heard rumors . . . surely there could *be* no rumors if only one person was involved.”

Lief looked down at the magic Belt of Deltora. The seven great gems gleamed, the topaz and the ruby brighter than all the rest.

The Belt’s power keeps the Shadow Lord back for now, but his hand still stretches into Deltora, he thought bitterly. We cannot trust smiling faces or loyal words. Even here in Broome . . .

He felt a small, strong hand grip his own. He lifted his head and met Jasmine’s bright eyes.

"I doubt we have an enemy in Broome, but we will take no risks," she said, as though she had read his mind. "We will leave here now — tonight. Then . . . we will disappear. We will disguise ourselves and take new names. We have done that before. Remember?"

"Yes," Lief muttered. "But I did not think we would ever have to do it again. In those days, I was not king and the Belt of Deltora had not been restored. In those days, I thought that if we succeeded in our quest we would all live happily ever after. I did not dream the nightmare would go on and on —"

He and Jasmine spun around as the door to the hall swung open in a blast of sound. Barda and Lindal of Broome strode out onto the veranda.

"Lindal saw you through the window," Barda said. "What —?"

He broke off as his eyes fell on the parchment in Lief's hand. His face sobered, and he glanced at Lindal.

"You will be wanting privacy," Lindal said quickly. She turned to go back into the hall.

Trust only old friends.

"No, Lindal, please stay," begged Lief. "We need your help."



Less than an hour later, four figures slipped silently out of the city gates. The dance was still in full swing, and no one saw them go.

Even if they had been seen, it was unlikely that the first three would have been recognized.

Only the woman turning to close the gates behind them would have been familiar. Lindal looked as she always did — tall and straight in leather jacket, leggings, and boots, her shaved skull painted with swirling red patterns.

Her friends, however, now looked very different.

All were dressed in the drab, close-fitting woolen caps and long oiled coats of Broome fisherfolk, and their most famous features had been disguised.

Lief no longer wore his cloak, and the Belt of Deltora was concealed beneath his clothes. Jasmine's hair was hidden under her cap and her face was streaked with grime so that she looked like a grubby young boy. Barda's dark beard had been cut back to rough stubble.

"It was bad enough playing the part of a beggar, in the old days," he grumbled. "But at least I still had my beard then. And I did not stink of fish that died before I was born!"

Lindal laughed. "Your garments smell very strong, I must admit. I suspect that no one will want to keep company with the rough-looking man Berry and his two young nephews, Lewin and Jay, for long."

"That will suit Berry, Lewin, and Jay very well," Jasmine answered, though Filli, crouched on her shoulder and rubbing his nose, plainly disagreed.

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"Filli will have to stay hidden, Jasmine," Lindal warned. "And Kree will have to keep his distance."

"I know," sighed Jasmine, glancing at the black bird perched on her arm. "And the journey to Shadowgate will be very long. I only wish Honey, Bella, and Swift were still with us."

"The horses are back in Del by now, no doubt," said Barda. "But we may be able to buy others in the north."

Lindal shook her head in wonder. Horses were unknown in Broome, where people used their own legs to carry them from place to place, whatever the distance.

"Thank you for all you have done for us, Lindal," Lief said, anxious to be gone. "Send Ebony back to Del in the morning. And remember, the ruby dragon has promised me that it will do the people of Broome no harm — as long as they leave it in peace."

"Time will tell," Lindal said darkly. "I do not place great value on a dragon's promise. Perhaps the ruby beast kept faith with Doran the Dragonlover. But that does not mean it will keep faith with you."

And at that very moment, Kree screeched a warning, and the stars above them were blotted out.

The ruby dragon swept above them. Its red scales glittered in the moonlight. Its wing beats were louder than the wind.

"Why, the beast has already broken its vow!" cried Lindal furiously, reaching for a spear. "It thinks

to take advantage of the celebration, to plunder the city!"

"Wait!" shouted Lief, throwing himself in front of her. "Lindal! Let me speak to it!"

Lindal tightened her lips, but pointed her spear to the ground.

The dragon landed in front of them and settled itself comfortably.

"Greetings, King of Deltora," it said to Lief. "You are leaving Broome a little earlier than you planned."

"Yes," Lief said uncomfortably. "It became . . . necessary."

The dragon nodded. "I approve," it said. "In darkness, we can fly unseen."

"What?" exclaimed Barda.

The dragon turned its flat red eyes in his direction. "Sadly, I cannot take you all the way to the second Sister," it said. "My oath to Dragonfriend prevents me from crossing my border. But I will take you as far as I am able."

It bared its terrible fangs in what it no doubt intended as a smile.

"Do you like my surprise?" it asked. "Are you not pleased? Dragonfriend always said it was the greatest happiness, to ride upon a dragon."