

FORGOTTEN REALMS
PANTASY ADVENTURE



Pool of Radiance

JAMES M. WARD
JANE COOPER HONG

POOL OF RADIANCE

Again Shal focused her thoughts; staring into the brilliant swirls of blue inside the globe, trying to envision her mentor. In a moment, she saw him.

She sucked in her breath. How could a man have changed so in a matter of days? Ranthor's robes were torn to shreds. His hair was unkempt and wild-looking. And his eyes ... his eyes were haunted-looking, as if he had seen sights no mortal eye should see.

"Shal, listen carefully. There is little time. I have risked everything to send this message to you. Despite our efforts, the beasts have somehow infiltrated the tower. My old friend is dead ... murdered. I must warn you to beware of the dragon of bronze. I have done all that I can to diminish its awesome power, but it still thrives. Shal, you must—"

"Ranthor! Look out!" Shal screamed wildly, but her words obviously didn't penetrate through the crystal. A dark figure loomed behind her teacher, and before Shal could do or say any more, it began to slash savagely at him with a long black dagger....

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James M. Ward and Jane Cooper Hong

**Cover Art by
CLYDE CALDWELL**



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To Dad and Aleta.

—J.C.

To my mother. Thanks, Mom, for making me take that typing class. You were right and I was wrong.

—J.M.

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Look Into the Crystal

Shal had spent days scouring the markets and traders' shops of Eveningstar and Arabel, the two towns nearest to the keep of her master, the Great Ranthor of Cormyr. The object of her search was a rare Wa herb, which her teacher refused to find for her. When she finally located the component he claimed made "a superlative dust for incendiary spells," she returned to his keep, where she read and reread the Burning Hands spell and tried for several days to master it. By the fourth day, Shal's hands were the only things blazing after repeated attempts to cast the spell.

"Drat!" she cried, hurling her spellbook and herbal components down in disgust, convinced that it was time for her to move on to another profession. Before her eyes, the handful of herbal dust puffed into a sensational blue cloud, and a vision of Ranthor, her teacher, appeared, besieged by a horde of vicious-looking orcs. The pig-faced creatures were armed with murderous weapons, and they were surging toward Ranthor in a wide band, leaving him no avenue of escape.

Blood and drool dripped from their grotesque mouths. Shal could feel herself being caught up in the vision, could smell the orcs' filthy bodies as they pressed closer, jabbing their jagged swords and knives at Ranthor ... at her. She backed away, but the wall that kept her from backing farther also seemed to stop Ranthor. Fear gripped her like a torturous clamp, making every muscle in her body rigid, unresponsive. Sweat streamed down her face, her back, and her breasts. She could no longer control her own breathing, and she knew she was going to die.

At that moment, Ranthor cast the Burning Hands spell. White-hot jets of flame burst from each of his fingertips, blasting the entire horde of orcs high into the air, incinerating each of the creatures they touched. The handful of orcs that landed on the ground alive proceeded to claw, pull, and scramble away from the wizard as fast as they could go, leaving the smoldering bodies of their companions behind them.

"Nice spell, Burning Hands," said Ranthor with a chuckle. "Comes in handy sometimes."

The blue cloud vanished, and Shal saw the discarded components arranged neatly on top of her spellbook....

That had happened more than three weeks ago, and she had mastered the Burning Hands spell the next day. With that one vision, Ranthor had managed to renew her interest, not only in a spell she had given up on, but also in spell-casting in general. Without a single harsh word, he had provided the insight that allowed her to identify which gesture she was performing incorrectly. Ranthor always seemed to have some way to keep her enthusiastic about magic. With subtle encouragement, he could get her dreaming of moving mountains or defeating the numerous monsters that threatened the people of their sparsely populated region.

Whenever she felt discouraged, her old master would remind her of her great promises. Whenever she grew tired of the rigors of memorizing spells or performing the dozens of

routine tasks that made up her day, she would receive a magical message from him reminding her that promise means nothing without diligence.

At the moment, Shal stood on the grounds of Ranthor's keep, struggling with a Weather Control spell he had encouraged her to try once she had mastered the Burning Hands spell. She faced the wind, just as Ranthor had instructed, and tried to visualize it. Her mind pictured the wind as pale, violet-white wisps of cloudlike material, and she imagined herself collecting the wisps within the exaggerated reach of her gesturing hands and molding them into a flat sheet so thin and so swift-moving that it could slice her enemies in two. Next she envisioned a solid wall of force that would push back her opponents. Then a churning funnel cloud that would suck them into its whirling vortex. Finally she intoned the words to the spell, taking care to match the inflection indicated in the runes she had so painstakingly memorized.

Unfortunately, each time she tried the spell, the results were the same. There was no wall of force ... not even a good strong gust. There was no cyclone ... not even a tiny dust devil. There was just a faint *whoosh*, and instantly the wind would pass by and out of her reach.

Tired and discouraged, Shal left the wind to its own devices and went inside the tower. She wished Ranthor were present to give her some of his usual valuable advice and support—some clue, anything. She wished, plain and simple, that he was back from his mission so she could stop worrying about him.

The day after Shal had mastered the Burning Hands spell, the same day Ranthor had suggested she try her hand at Weather Control, her master had departed. Shal had been in Ranthor's spell-casting chamber working on a Lightning spell. She knew she wasn't ready yet to attempt the spell outside. She wanted merely to create one little bolt that would arc between the conductor she had positioned on the crux of Ranthor's casting stand and the copper spike she'd fastened to a nearby shelf of components.

She meditated for a moment to help her mind focus, then traced and retraced with her eyes the path that she wanted the lightning to follow. Finally she lifted her hands and spoke, with all the intensity she could muster, the words of the spell. A crystal orb on a nearby shelf of components began to blaze red, growing steadily. With the final word of the spell still on her tongue, Shal screamed for Ranthor, and immediately the lightning began to pulse about the room, rattling the jars of magical components and sending several crashing to the floor. Her aging master rushed into the chamber as fast as his rheumatism-ridden legs could carry him. In one hand, he held a wand, its tip glowing with a molten fire, and in the other, he held a small bag of sparkling dust, no doubt some powerful weapon he had grabbed to use against whatever horror he found in the spell-casting area.

When he entered the room, he found Shal braced against the wall, an expression of stark terror on her face, pointing at the glowing crystal. He took one look and began to laugh, first a light, whispering snicker, then a full belly laugh. "Shal, my student of three years, do you not yet know that wizards use orbs to contact each other? That is simply my old friend Denlor calling me," Ranthor explained, pointing at the crystal. He breathed a single arcane syllable, and the orb rose into the air and began to float toward Shal. Despite her teacher's amusement, Shal could feel the hairs rise on the back of her neck as the glowing orb drifted closer.

"Pick it up, Shal." Ranthor removed the bronze cone from the center of the three-legged

casting stand and pointed at the crux where the three legs met and crossed. “Pick it up,” he repeated when she hesitated. “Put it here.”

Shal expected nothing less than for her fingers to sizzle the moment they made contact with the blazing crystal ball. She reached out gingerly, turning her head aside so she wouldn’t have to watch as her flesh melded to its fiery surface. Much to Shal’s surprise, the ball was cold to the touch—icy, in fact—and when she did touch it, she felt her body suddenly awash in feelings of a different sort. So chilling was the ball’s aura that Shal nearly dropped it before she could place it in the ebony stand.

“Watch, and I’ll show you how this is done,” said Ranthor, his voice still sounding with a hint of laughter. “Not that you should be playing with crystal balls on your own any time soon, you understand ...”

He waved his hands over the globe with practiced deliberation, then stepped back with a pleased look on his face as the ball floated to a secure position just a hand’s height above the casting stand. “Concentration is the key here, young lady. Concentration, and not letting the crystal ball touch anything before you’re completely finished with it.

“Look into the crystal with me. Concentrate. Picture a wizard ... much like myself, but shorter, stockier, and dressed in red.”

Shal closed her eyes to concentrate.

“No! You must look into the crystal. The crystal will project the image, but it needs your help.”

Opening her eyes until they were mere slits, Shal stared into the swirling, iridescent red blaze of the globe. Wizard, she thought. Like Ranthor but shorter. She leaned closer. Yes. There was something there—the outline of a robe, the image of a man.... Finally it came into clear focus. The man in the globe was obviously a wizard, but he looked nothing like Ranthor. Even with his crippling rheumatism, Ranthor had a commanding presence. His gestures, his meticulously pressed blue robes—everything about him bespoke style. The man in the globe, however, was rumpiled, disheveled-looking. He obviously cared little about his appearance. Nonetheless, his smile was warm, and Shal could feel an unusual bond of loyalty flowing between this mage, Denlor, and her master.

“Ranthor, my trusted friend! You must know how glad I am to have reached you.”

Shal stared, wide-eyed. Denlor wasn’t speaking. Instead, she was somehow *experiencing* his thoughts—the words, as if spoken aloud, and much more than that. She could feel his exhaustion ... and his panic.

“I would not have called on you, Ranthor, if my need were not great. Every vile beast ever belched up from the Pit is clamoring at the gate to my keep in Phlan. The protective magical emanating from my tower are steadily weakening. I need your help, old friend. I can’t hold out much longer, and there is much more at stake than just my aging bones.”

Denlor’s desperation washed over Shal. She could hear the sound that had echoed in the mage’s brain day after day for untold nights—the din of a thousand unspeakable beasts growling, snarling, slavering, clawing at the walls that kept him and his tower from destruction. Denlor thought of his waning defenses, magical and otherwise, and as he did, her thoughts were Shal’s thoughts. She gasped as she realized that she now knew the location of every trap in Denlor’s keep, the arcane words that would open or seal every door in his tower, and she sensed the vulnerability of what had once been an impenetrable magical

fortress.

“Ranthor, please ... please help me!” Denlor pleaded imploringly.

Suddenly the image within the globe faded into a swirl of red, and then the sphere returned to its original icy crystal white and nestled gently back into the crux of the ebony tripod.

Shal let out her breath and turned to her master.

“My dear Shal, I’m so sorry,” Ranthor began sincerely. “That wasn’t any way to introduce you to crystal balls. Please understand that they can bear good news as well as bad. But this time, I’m afraid, the news is bad indeed. I must go immediately to the aid of my friend. I charge you to keep up with your magical studies and watch after this place until I return.”

Shal never even had a chance to respond as Ranthor flew from one room to the next with a flurry of gestures, words, and instructions that left her dizzy. Just as she finally recovered the presence of mind to ask if there was anything she could do to help, the mage whisked into her private spell-casting chamber, the door closed with a definitive thud, and she was left standing outside, alone. More than an hour passed before Ranthor emerged, but when he did, Shal was still standing exactly where he had left her.

He paused and faced his apprentice, holding out a yellow, rolled parchment. “Keep this scroll, Shal. Open it only if you have reason to believe I will not return. I must go now to Denlor, to Phlan. May the gods be with you—and with me.” Ranthor had whispered a magical command, then vanished into the smoky blue haze of his Teleport spell....

That was the last Shal had seen or heard from her teacher. She knew she wasn’t likely to make progress on her Weather Control spells or any other kind of magic until she received some word of reassurance from Ranthor. In the meantime, she realized, there was a tower full of chores that beckoned—wonderful, mindless activities that would serve as distraction from her anxious thoughts.

She decided to tackle a task she had been putting off for days—dusting the countless shelves of magical components in Ranthor’s storeroom. A wizard’s components, she knew from her training, were almost as important as his spellbooks. Someone had to keep them all in order, and once a wizard reached a certain level, that someone was almost invariably an apprentice.

As Shal entered the storeroom and faced its row after row of shelving, she sighed and began musing to herself. She sometimes wondered why anyone would ever want to become a wizard’s apprentice. It seemed a never-ending stream of menial chores and discouraging hours of practice. Somehow she couldn’t picture Ranthor ever stumbling over a word, as she frequently did, when he cast a spell. Shal smiled grimly as she tried to imagine Ranthor stooping down to dust shelves. He must have found some way to bypass the apprentice stage and progress straight to wizard, she thought wryly.

Shal stared at the rows of shelving stretched out before her. It would take hours. The dust hadn’t been at all selective about which shelves or components to cover. The fine film of gray powder coated everything, and the spiders had been having a heyday. Shal stood staring for several more seconds, then grabbed a rag and plunged ruefully ahead into the maze of shelving.

As Shal reached the end of a long row of shelves, she wiped her brow and paused, turning to glance at herself in the large viewing mirror that Ranthor used to practice his gestures. Her shoulder-length hair, though matted with perspiration at the ends, was vibrant and silky and

shimmered auburn red even in the dull light from the handful of lamps that lit her master's huge laboratory. Her skin was clear and as smooth as polished ivory, and her nose and cheeks were fine and delicate. She couldn't help but know she was attractive—just tall enough to suit off her perfectly sculpted petite frame, and just saucy enough in her mannerisms to attract the attention of almost any man she took a fancy to.

From her studies under Ranthor, Shal had learned of the damage that certain powerful magic could do to the caster's skin, hair, and overall vigor. She had discussed the subject with Ranthor on several occasions, expressing some of her fears. Ranthor had chided her for her vanity, but he also reminded her that beauty and magic were not mutually exclusive. "There are times," he had said, "when you *must* use strong magic. There are other times when you can avoid it. But you must never get caught up in your fear of the physical consequences of spell-casting. It will hinder your ability to excel at your chosen profession."

Nonetheless, Shal had still persisted in asking Ranthor about the effects of different spells. She knew that the Burning Hands spell was not one she wanted to use often. The Weather Control spells were not so bad—and, of course, they'd never hurt her at all if she didn't figure out how they worked! She turned her attention back to the dusty shelves, wishing she knew a spell that would make the chore a little less tedious.

She thought about Ranthor, trying once more to picture him as an apprentice dusting shelves. As she did, a thought came to her. Of course! she reasoned. Why didn't I think of that before? Ranthor would never pick up every vial and pouch. He'd use the very first cantrip he ever taught me! And here I thought I was going to be here till dusk!

She turned back to the row where she had left off, located a bit of elk horn dust in her pouch, and sprinkled it on the shelf. Then she whispered three arcane words and shouted "*Rasal!*" Instantly the vials and components on the rack before her rose several inches from the shelves. As they hung there suspended, she quickly dusted the four tiers in a fraction of the time it would have taken her otherwise.

"Ah, yes, there are advantages to magic," Shal said jubilantly. She moved on to the next rack of shelves and the next, repeating the same cantrip. After cleaning three more racks, she decided to try her hand at doing two at a time.

She concentrated a moment longer this time before incanting the words of the cantrip. To her delight, all of the items on both racks floated from the shelves. As before, she reached out with her dusting cloth, but this time, one of the magical items, a large crystal sphere, began to glow a bright blue. Shal leaped back, startled out of her wits. Instantly all of the components came crashing down with a terrifying clatter—except for the sphere. The sphere proceeded to glow ever brighter, its indigo light blazing like a hot flame, searing Shal's wide open eyes with its brilliance.

Instinctively she called out to Ranthor for help. But, of course, Ranthor wasn't there. She realized, once she recovered from her initial start, that the glowing blue orb that hung before her was probably carrying a message from Ranthor. After all, blue was his favorite color, and there hadn't been any word from him since he'd left.

Quickly Shal picked up the sphere, whisked it into the next chamber, and placed it on the casting stand. Ranthor's words came back to her: "*Concentration is the key here ... Concentration, and not letting the ball touch anything before you're completely finished with it.*"

But how had Ranthor raised the crystal to just the right distance above the casting stand? Shal didn't know. Surely her master hadn't used anything as mundane as the Raise Object cantrip she had been practicing moments ago.... It couldn't hurt to try, though, Shal thought. Slowly she waved her hands over the glowing ball as she had seen Ranthor do. The globe concentrating hard, she spoke the words of the cantrip. Moving so slowly that Shal could hardly detect it, the globe rose to a perfect hand's height above the casting stand, just as she had for Ranthor! Again she focused her thoughts, staring into the brilliant swirls of blue, trying to envision her mentor. In a moment, she saw him.

She sucked in her breath. How could a man have changed so in a matter of days? Ranthor's robes were torn to shreds. His hair was unkempt and wild-looking. And his eyes ... his eyes were haunted-looking, as if he had seen sights no mortal eye should see.

"Shal, listen carefully. There is little time. I have risked everything to send this message to you. Despite our efforts, the beasts have somehow infiltrated the tower. My old friend is dead ... murdered. I must warn you to beware of the dragon of bronze. I have done all that I can to diminish its awesome power, but it still thrives. Shal, you must—"

"Ranthor! Look out!" Shal screamed wildly, but her words obviously didn't penetrate through the crystal. A dark figure loomed behind her teacher, and before Shal could do or say any more, it began to slash savagely at him with a long black dagger. She could see no face, no features, only that the arm lashing out with the dagger was adorned with a bizarre, snake's-head armlet.

"Sha—!" Ranthor's scream ended in a grotesque gurgle, and the crystal ball burst into shards and splinters.

Shal's muscles went limp and she dropped to the floor. "My god! Oh, my god! Ranthor ..."

Tears formed in her eyes, and she stared absently at her arms. Blood was welling up in a dozen places where fragments of crystal had embedded themselves in her flesh. Shal watched numbly as droplets of blood became engorged and then burst and trickled down her arms. She reached up and touched her face, brushing gently at more splinters lodged there.

"Damn it, Ranthor! Why didn't you teach me more so I could warn you or cast a spell and save you? You should've taught me some way to help you! Damn! You can't leave me like this! Please ... come back!" In rapid succession, numbness turned to anger, anger to rage, rage to disbelief, and disbelief to depression. Sobs racked Shal's small frame as she continued to sit, clutching her knees to her chest.

"Keep this scroll, Shall."

Shal bolted to a standing position. The voice was her master's, and she had heard it as clearly as if he were standing beside her. Could he still be communicating with her through the crystal? No, the crystal was no more.

"Open it only if you have reason to believe I will not return...."

It was Ranthor's voice once again, and this time Shal realized that he was not speaking to her himself. She remembered him telling her about Magic Mouth spells, which enable wizards to leave messages in their own voices. What she was hearing, she knew, was from a spell he must have cast before he left. Something she had done, or something that happened had triggered the voice.

Shal plucked the remaining fragments of crystal from her skin and clothing and hurried to her study area. Her master was no longer with her, but she could still observe his wishes.

There, on her study table where she had left it, was the scroll, a blue aura shimmering around it. Her hand trembled violently as she reached for the scroll. She didn't want to read it, knowing that to do so was to admit that Ranthor was dead. Finally she clenched her teeth and picked up the carefully tied piece of parchment. As Shal unfastened the silk tie, the blue aura dispersed. She knew that if someone else had tried to open the scroll, his hand would have burned to cinders when he violated the magical seal. She placed one of her spellbooks on the top of the unfurled scroll and one at the bottom and sat down to read it.

Ranthor's script was bold and fluid. He had always chided Shal for her sloppy penmanship and as she recognized for the first time the full beauty of Ranthor's writing, Shal vowed that she would work to improve her own.

My dearest Apprentice, Shal Bal of Cormyr,

I cannot know the exact circumstances that bring you to read this, only that, somehow, I have been taken from you and from the Realms we walked together as teacher and student. You can do nothing for me, except to follow my instructions one last time.

Go now to my personal chambers. The door will open at your bidding when you speak, with the full authority of my magical command that I have taught you, the word "Halcyon."

Use wisely the magical legacy and treasures you find within those walls. I know you can surpass me and become a great spell-caster—if that is your most sincere desire.

You have my eternal love. May the gods be with you.

Ranthor

Shal sat for a moment, dazed, staring at the letter. She read it through again, then cried aloud, "I don't want your treasures, Ranthor! What kind of a ghoul do you think I am?" She was about to crumple the scroll and throw it across the room, when the center of the parchment began to smoke. A pale yellow flame licked up, burning an ever-widening circle on the paper. Shal quickly grabbed her spellbooks from the desk before they, too, were caught in the magical blaze. The fire stopped as suddenly as it had begun, leaving no damage whatsoever to her desk and not even a trace of the scroll Shal had just read.

Shal wanted to scream out, but the words from the scroll prompted her to action: "*Go now to my personal chambers...*" Shal swallowed hard, raised herself to her feet, and walked purposefully to the door of Ranthor's quarters. Straightening her shoulders, she held her head high and cried, "*Halcyon!*" The great oak doors swung open at her command, and she walked in, her eyes wide, knowing that this room contained her master's most cherished personal items and that he was entrusting all he had left therein to her.

She definitely did not expect, however, the stamping, snorting bluish-white stallion that stood proudly in the center of the room. "*A magical steed for a magical journey.*" Shal was startled once again by the sound of Ranthor's voice, no doubt the product of another spell cast before he left for Phlan. "*Trust his warnings and you won't go wrong. I summoned this steed, my trusted familiar, when I was your age. Cerulean has served me well, and so he will serve you.*"

Shal had seen Ranthor riding the big white horse, but it had never occurred to her that the animal was anything other than just a horse. Shal had talked with Ranthor about familiar

intelligent animal companions many mages relied on for character judgments, a word of advice, or a second set of eyes during times of danger. Ranthor had said Shal would know when it was her time to summon a familiar, that the desire for trustworthy companionship grows stronger as a mage becomes more engrossed in his or her craft. At the time, Shal had taken that as one of Ranthor's many gentle nudges to work harder at her magic.

Shal gingerly held her hand out toward the obviously high-strung horse, then sighed in relief as he relaxed, whuffled quietly, and nuzzled her hand. Next Cerulean nudged Shal's shoulder and walked toward the back of the room. Shal followed him to a huge onyx table. Running her hands over its shiny black surface, she stared in awe at the array of magical items spread before her. She recognized two potions of healing that she had helped Ranthor collect ingredients for and the Wand of Wonder she had often seen in her master's hand. There were also a small square of shimmering indigo velvet, a ring, and a straight rosewood staff that stood taller than Shal.

"I wish I could be here in person to guide you, Shal but you must learn your craft by yourself." Ranthor's voice, as preserved by his spell, was soft and gentle. She could sense his regret. *"The items assembled before you are functional and powerful. They will aid you until you mature your own spell-casting ability. The potions, of course, you already know how to use. The Wand of Wonder is simply pointed at a target in a time of need, while you express the need in the tongue of the arcane. But I must caution you: Do not use the wand unless you have no alternative. Its effects are always wondrous, as the name implies, but they are random, which can sometimes be dangerous. The Cloth of Many Pockets I have filled with everything you might need for a journey."*

"Everything I might need? In this?" Shal lifted the small square of velvet and unfolded it again and again and again. Soon the blue cloth was spread over the entire table. Dozens of pockets covered its surface.

"Simply tell the cloth what you need. As long as it's one of the things on the list you'll find in the top right corner pocket, you'll find it simply by reaching your hand into any one of the pockets. Try it. Say 'Feed for my horse,' and reach into any pocket." Ranthor's voice paused.

Shal felt as if she were being watched. " 'Feed for my horse,' " she said self-consciously. Even after being told what would happen, Shal could hardly believe it when she reached into a pocket and removed a sack of oats and a feed bag. The cloth was an incredible resource worth many thousands of gold pieces on the open market.

"Now pick up the staff." The voice was again Ranthor's, but this time it seemed to be coming from the other side of the room. He must have left yet another message preserved with a spell. Some day, Shal vowed, she would learn the spell Ranthor had used to communicate his final wishes. The voice went on: *"This is the Staff of Power. Look carefully, and you will see many runes etched along its length."*

Shal hefted the staff, admiring its workmanship. It was much lighter than it appeared, and it was perfectly balanced, a splendid weapon even if it had no magic. The lower portion of the staff was polished to a smooth finish and tapered to an end just blunt and thick enough to support the weight of someone using it for a walking staff, but sharp enough to use as a weapon if need be. The rest of the staff, from a point about a foot off the ground to the large perfectly smooth wooden ball that capped its end, was ringed with the carved figures of each of the benevolent gods of the Realms. As Ranthor had noted, the surfaces between the carvings were covered with ornately etched runes.

Ranthor's voice continued its explanation. *"The runes are now just so much poetry but speak the same word you used to open my chamber door and the staff will be covered with the magic script I have taught you to decipher. Study these writings. They are the command words you will need to make this tremendous weapon serve you. I received the staff from a wizard friend who has passed from this plain, so unfortunately there is no way of knowing how many magical charges it retains. Therefore, do not squander its power. Keep the Staff of Power in the Cloth of Many Pockets until you are forced to use it. I advise you not to use the staff in front of strangers unless you plan on killing them, or you are willing to trust them with your life. Many a young mage has lost his life as a result of displaying such power to newfound friends."*

Shal felt a chill pass through her body. She had never had reason to kill anyone. Somehow though, as she heard Ranthor's voice speaking of killing, she felt a deep rage rising up inside her. What moments ago had been senseless anger directed at herself, at Ranthor, and at the world at large was growing into a directed fury against whoever, or whatever, had taken Ranthor from her. Nothing she could do would bring her master back, but she vowed to avenge him. She owed Ranthor that and more.

The voice continued. *"I have one more thing to show you, Shal. Pick up the ring and place it on the middle finger of your right hand. Say nothing and do nothing further until I have finished."*

Shal was startled by a sudden sternness in Ranthor's voice. She placed the ring on her middle finger, marveling at its perfection and the way it fit—almost as if it had been made for her hand.

"You now wear on your hand a Ring of Three Wishes. You have studied wishing lore, so I'm sure you understand how great a force you have at your disposal. Use it only at times of greatest need. And one more caution. Don't even think of wishing me back."

Her master had read her mind, even in death.

"Though the ring is powerful enough to accomplish even that, I am now where fate and the gods would have me. I lived many years and am fully prepared for what awaits me in death. You must now use the ring and all else I have given you for your own good."

Shal bit her lip. She could feel the tears starting to well up again.

"Weep not for me." Ranthor's voice was now directly in front of her. She could almost imagine his warm hand grasping her shoulder. *"My life was full, especially these last three years that you were with me. May yours be as much and more. Farewell, Shal Bal of Cormyr."*

Shal knew that she had heard her master's voice for the last time. She thought back to how she had come to study under the great wizard. Her family—her father, her mother, and her brothers—were all sell-swords. Shal was quite small and slightly built, to the point that wielding even a short sword was difficult for her, not to mention trudging the countryside decked out in pounds of chain mail and other battle gear. There had never been any magical users in their family, and her parents had no reason to suspect that their daughter should have any talent in that area, but when Shal turned sixteen, they heard of the proclamation announcing that the great Ranthor of Cormyr was interviewing for an apprentice, and they sent Shal.

She had watched transfixed as a young man before her had caused a cloth to ignite by speaking a word. A young woman had made a pitcher rise into the air and pour a drink for the wizard. Shal had felt foolish and inept. She couldn't even perform a simple shell trick, let alone true magic. Her parents had admonished her, "Be honest and promise diligence at your

studies,” and that is what she had done. When Ranthor asked her what magic she had studied, she wanted to run away and hide, but she’d said with all the courage she could muster, “None, sir.” When he asked her what purse her parents had brought to pay for her education, she wanted to bolt from his presence. They had sent nothing with her. She stammered for a moment before her response. “It—it was billed as—as an apprenticeship. They—I thought my labor would pay.”

“And it will,” Ranthor had said simply. It was not until much later that Shal learned that most apprentice mages pay enormous sums for their educations, especially when they studied under a wizard of Ranthor’s stature. She also learned, as she came to know other young apprentices, that many youthful mages were veritable slaves to their masters, yet Ranthor never expected more of her than the performance of routine chores—and above all, diligence at her studies.

Shal stared down at the onyx table, her eyes taking in the many things Ranthor had left for her. Suddenly Cerulean nudged her shoulder with his muzzle. He pushed the sack of oats to the floor and quickly began to rifle the bag. “Poor thing. I suppose even magic steeds have to eat.” She poured some oats into the feed bag and held it out to the horse. Instead of eating greedily as Shal thought he would, the horse pressed his head hard against her back and pushed her toward the doorway.

“Oats aren’t good enough for you, or are you just being friendly in some odd way?” Shal asked, amused at the animal’s gesture.

Naturally I like oats, but I don’t really need them. After all, I am magical, you know.

The mental communication from the horse took Shal completely by surprise. The last thing she had expected was a response. She’d lived around magic for three years and had seen many unusual things. In the back of her mind, she even knew that familiars communicated somehow with their masters, but she had never experienced the mental barrage of telepathy—or taken part in a conversation, telepathic or otherwise—with a horse. She found it more than a little unnerving.

It’s you who needs to eat. You’re planning to go to Phlan, aren’t you?

Shal looked at Cerulean quizzically. As if mental communication wasn’t jarring enough, he “thought” with the pronounced accent of someone from the Eastern Realms. Shal responded aloud. “I’ve been thinking about it. Do you read minds, too?”

No, but I’m far from stupid, and I’m not afraid to express my ideas. The horse raised its head a little with that thought. *I just assume that you will be wanting to dispatch whoever or whatever killed our master.*

“Our master? I’d rather you didn’t phrase it exactly that way. It makes me sound like I’m talking to a horse.”

My apologies. How about if I call you Mistress from now on?

“Fine. So, what do you do when I’m not riding you?”

Sometimes our mas—uh, Ranthor—would make me climb in one of the pockets of that cloth. Cerulean angled his head in the direction of the table, where the indigo cloth still lay spread out. *I don’t much care for that, actually. It’s dark in there—pitch black, in fact. As long as there’s plenty of room, I prefer to just vanish and walk around.*

“Really?” Shal asked. “And what if there’s not plenty of room?”

Then I just wait outside—you know, invisible. As long as no one runs into me, it works out fine. But we can discuss all that en route to the kitchen. You really should eat, Mistress. And then v

need to make travel plans for our trip to Phlan.

Shal shook her head. She didn't know what startled her more—the fact that the horse could communicate or that its communication was so decisive. She wondered for a moment how Ranthor had interacted with Cerulean. Whenever Shal had suggested that Ranthor had been working too hard and should eat, he would all but shoo her away. She couldn't imagine Ranthor taking instructions from a horse. She looked wistfully toward the last place from which she had heard Ranthor's voice. Although she expected no answer, she still asked the question: "Ranthor, you said this horse served you well. You didn't say it had rather firm opinions about being left in the dark, or that it stood around outside waiting for someone to run into it. Where's my 'magic steed' instruction booklet, Ranthor? Aren't you the one who thought of everything?"

Well, if you're going to be that way about it.... Cerulean's eyes assumed a hurt look, and he stomped out of the room and vanished.

"Cerulean, come back here!" Shal called out to the thin air, feeling rather foolish. "I just haven't got the hang of this yet."

You mean you'll eat?

"Yes, I'll eat. I'll meet you in the kitchen." Shal walked down the corridor, fully expecting at any moment to bump into an invisible horse, but when she reached the kitchen, Cerulean was already there. He was quite visible again.

Shal cut herself two pieces of goat's cheese and bread and poured herself half a flagon of mineral water. She took a bite of the sandwich and then raised the flagon in her right hand and held it up toward Cerulean. "To Ranthor, to magical horses, and to magical journeys! May the gods be with us, Cerulean!"

Cerulean nodded his head and whinnied softly. *To Ranthor and the past. To you, Mistress, and to the future.*

Shal finished her simple dinner with an apple, which she shared with Cerulean. After tidying up, she packed, putting everything she thought she could use in the Cloth of Magic Pockets and adding a few more things in Cerulean's saddlebags. Then she went through the entire keep, magically sealing doorways, rooms, and passages with the command words Ranthor had taught her. Spells of protection had been one of Ranthor's specialties, and Shal knew as she stood at the outer gate of the keep that nothing short of a god could enter before she returned.

"Not bad for an apprentice—right, Cerulean?" The big stallion laid its head on her shoulder and looked back at the keep. After a last brief moment of remembering, Shal turned, mounted Cerulean, and resolved to make Ranthor proud of her on this, her first true adventure. "To Phlan, big fellow. Let's go!"

Cerulean galloped like no horse Shal had ever ridden. The movements of the stallion's huge body were so fluid that Shal almost felt as if she were flying. She rode for miles at an incredible pace, and Cerulean never tired.

Shal took advantage of the smooth ride to study her new magical tools and learn the command words written on the Staff of Power. Before she knew it, the sun was setting. "Well done, Cerulean! Let's stop and rest."

Shal started to go about the motions of setting up camp as she'd seen her brothers do when she was younger. She kept her riding gloves on to protect her hands as she gathered wood

and kindling. There was no need to struggle with flint and steel to start the fire, either. Instead, she used a simple cantrip Ranthor had taught her. As the fire began to blaze, Shal stood back and proudly admired her handiwork. She unrolled her bedding and was about to heat a piece of jerky for dinner when Cerulean began to snort and stamp. "Is something wrong?" Shal whispered, wondering if she was about to encounter intruders.

Aren't you going to take care of the beast that brought you? Do you think I want to carry the saddlebags all night? Or chew on this hunk of metal in my dreams?

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Immediately Shal began to remove the offending tack. Unstrapping Cerulean's bridle and removing his bit was easy. Undoing the stiff saddle harness wasn't even too taxing. But when Shal started to lift the saddle and packs off Cerulean's back, she almost buckled under the weight.

"Oof! This is heavy! I wish I were stronger!" And with her last words, she let out a gasp.

The magic of the Ring of Three Wishes worked instantly. Shal could feel herself growing larger, stronger. The saddle became like a feather in her hands. Her once perfectly fitted riding gear bound her flesh so tightly that the seams split. She flung the saddle to the ground with a force her petite body had never been capable of and watched in horror as her delicate hands and slender arms grew into what she perceived as huge, brawny appendages. She watched her feet, calves, and thighs expand in a similar fashion, and she could feel a sheath of muscled flesh building on her once trim stomach.

"No!" she screamed. "No!" She knew enough about wishing lore to know that she had made the cardinal mistake of wishers. She had wished carelessly. "Look at me! I'm a monster! I'm huge!" she cried. Shal fell to her knees, terrified and disgusted by what she had done. She knew the change was permanent unless she used another wish.

Cerulean tried desperately to break into her thoughts. Her terror and revulsion registered on his brain like a stabbing knife. The image projected by Shal was of a grotesque parody of a human female, distorted almost beyond recognition by musculature and sinews. The reality was quite different. Cerulean could perceive human beauty. He certainly had a sense of what Ranthor found attractive in women. Shal had indeed changed as a result of the wish; she was considerably larger than she had been. But the basic beauty of her features and the proportion of her figure had not changed. If she was unattractive, it was only to someone who could not find beauty in a large woman. Her appearance was marred only by the ripped, ill-fitting clothing that still managed to hold a few parts of her expanded figure captive.

But Shal was oblivious to Cerulean's mental shouts. She stared at the big calves that protruded from where her ankles had been, and at her forearms, where they tested the limits of the wrist cuffs. She could only imagine what her face must look like.

Her immediate thought was to wish herself back to her former size. But as much as she wanted to make that wish, she shook her head resolutely. No, Ranthor had entrusted his entire magical legacy to her. It was not to be wasted. Shal's one goal was to make him proud. She had made a gross mistake, and she must live with it. The ring's magic must be preserved for her quest to avenge her master's murder.

"What a fool I am! I can't even trust myself with a simple ring!" she chastised herself. She reached for the ring to pull it off, but her hands had grown much larger than before and the ring wouldn't budge. "Damn! Instead of wishing to be strong, I could at least have wished that me and my belongings were in Phlan—"

“No!” Shal screamed as she felt the ring’s magic working once more. Before she could even blink, she found herself kneeling on the planks of a long wooden dock, facing the twilight silhouette of a city she had never seen but knew without a doubt was Phlan. Her bedroll, horse, saddle, and Cerulean were beside her. The horror of her stupidity bludgeoned her like a battle-axe, and she fell prostrate on the dock and wept, beating her fists against the planks with each rage-filled sob.

Passersby gawked at the huge but comely woman and her seemingly shrunken leather clothing, but none moved closer or offered assistance. They could see a great war-horse standing protectively by the woman’s side, and if that wasn’t enough, the big woman was rattling the two-inch-thick boards of the dock with every blow of her massive fists. If the woman wanted to cry in public, there were few if any who would question her or try to stop her.

2 The Test

Two wagons bumped and jolted their way along the deeply rutted road. “Yo! Tarl!” Brother Donal called down from the head wagon. “Can you interrupt your hammer-throwing long enough to lead the horses up out of these ruts?”

“No problem, Brother Donal,” answered Tarl. The young cleric hurried ahead of the first wagon to retrieve the war hammer he had just launched at an unfortunate sapling, and then he jogged back to the lead draft horse. Tarl pulled gently but firmly on the horse’s bridle, guiding the animal to the side of the narrow roadway where the path was a little smoother. The horses pulling the second wagon followed suit, stepping into line behind the first. Tarl continued to walk just ahead of the front wagon, knowing that they would soon reach the point where they must leave the pass through the foothills of the Dragonspine Mountains and follow the legendary Stojanow River south into Phlan.

Brother Anton, who had been riding beside Brother Donal, jumped down to join Tarl. “Your practice is comin’ along well. Unless my eyes deceive me, you haven’t missed your mark in a dozen throws.”

An unabashed grin broke out on Tarl’s face, and he muttered an embarrassed thank-you. A giant of a man reached his side. Like Tarl and the other ten men journeying together to Phlan, Anton was a warrior cleric in a sect that worshiped Tyr, the Even-Handed, God of Justice and War. Anton’s weapon of choice was the throwing hammer. He could split a good-sized tree—or a good-sized man—with one well-aimed throw.

“Now, don’t go gettin’ puffed up from a word o’ praise,” said Anton sternly. “What I wantin’ to tell you is that you’re doin’ just fine with that toy hammer of yours. Fact is, you don’t even have to think about it anymore.” The big man mimicked a limp-wristed throw—“Whoosh, thunk, bull’s-eye ... every throw. It’s time now for you to learn to put your back into it, lad. Get yourself a real hammer and start practicin’ a man’s throw.”

Anton reached under his tunic and pulled from his belt a hammer that was easily twice the size of Tarl’s.

Tarl shook his head from side to side. “But that’s a smith’s hammer. It’s for fixing armor, not fighting.”

Anton stiff-armed Tarl to the ground. “Foolish whelp! Do ya think I don’t know what kind of hammer this is? Do ya think you’ll always have your choice of weapons in a fight?” Anton held the hammer down to Tarl, and when Tarl grabbed hold, Anton jerked him to his feet with an effortless tug. “You’d better get used to usin’ anything ya can get your hands on as a weapon—I don’t care if it’s a smith’s hammer or a hunk o’ wood. Now, start throwin.’ Start shatterin’ a bit of this countryside instead o’ just dentin’ it.”

Tarl stared dumbly at the hammer for a moment, feeling its weight and its awkward balance as he shifted it in his hand.

“One more thing, Tarl. I want you to make every fifth throw lyin’ on either your back or your belly. Many’s the time I had to take an enemy down after bein’ decked myself,” Anton

said with a grimace of recollection.

Tarl seriously doubted that the huge Anton had ever been knocked down in battle, but his stinging backside was an effective reminder that he was in no position to argue the point. Besides, Tarl had no business even thinking about arguing with a senior brother in the order, and anyhow, he knew Anton was right. Tarl shifted the heavy hammer back and forth in his hand several times, then raised it and stepped into his first throw. The big hammer spiraled crookedly through the air and fell to the ground a good six feet short of the tree Tarl was aiming at. Tarl jogged past the lead wagon to where the hammer had landed. Anton fell a step alongside the head wagon and left Tarl to his throwing.

It had been nearly two years since Tarl's eighteenth birthday, when he had taken his clerical vows in the Order of Tyr. He had been traveling with these eleven brothers in the faith for only eight weeks, but he believed he had learned more in that short time than he had in his previous twenty-two months at the temple in Vaasa.

Even on the road, Tarl continued to be tutored in his studies and devotionals, and the combat training was more intensive than anything to which he had previously been exposed. Brother Donal had drilled Tarl in techniques for guarding the flanks and rear when fighting with allies. Brother Sontag had taught him the use of the ball and chain, a grisly weapon almost as dangerous to use in practice as in battle. Tarl had received a nasty blow to the head in the middle of one of his own practice swings that left him with the utmost respect for Brother Sontag and his chosen weapon, and a headache as well. Even before today's instruction, Brother Anton had worked with Tarl for many days, in his usual gruff but effective manner, drilling him on the use of the shield as both a defensive and offensive weapon.

Tarl was anxious to test his new skills in battle, and he knew his chance would come before long. He and the eleven brothers with whom he was traveling had been charged with delivering the sacred Hammer of Tyr to the newly built temple in Phlan. None of the men had ever been to Phlan before, but they had learned something of the port city's history before setting out on their mission.

As Tarl understood it, some fifty years ago, Phlan had been completely leveled by marauding dragons. Evil creatures of all description had subsequently moved into the ruins, and it had been only in the last few years that people had regained control of a portion of the city and brought back to it some semblance of civilization. However, most of Phlan was still uninhabited by chaotic, evil creatures, and the Stojanow River, which had once been the city's lifeblood, had been mysteriously turned to a vile, stinking channel of acidic poisons.

The Temple of Tyr was the first temple to be erected in the city since its fall. The revered Hammer of Tyr would provide symbolic strength to the occupants of the temple, and would be wielded by the temple's head cleric when the warrior clerics were ready to assist Phlan's residents in the reclamation of even more of the city's lost territory. Tarl and his companions were to add their strength to the existing forces of the new temple.

The thought of real action stirred something in Tarl. He yearned to earn a name for himself as a great warrior of Tyr, a powerful cleric serving the cause of good in the Realms. Tarl had already had gained the respect of his teachers for his exceptional clerical abilities. But his healing powers were a gift from Tyr, not a skill he had developed through sweat and dedication. He wanted to prove his devotion to his god and the order by succeeding in battle.

the true vocation of the Tyrian clerics.

As Tarl continued to practice, he envisioned all manner of foes. He took dead aim at tree-ogres, stone-orcs, and stump-kobolds. Unfortunately, the monsters seemed to be winning. Tarl focused his concentration on his next throw—aim, step, close, swing ... and release. The smith's hammer whirred as it spun end-over-end and smashed with a resounding *clunk* into the small boulder Tarl had targeted. It was Tarl's third hit since he had started practicing with the awkward hammer, but the first two had only reached their mark; this one split it in two. Had the rock been a hobgoblin, its head would have been split wide open.

"One enemy dies, Tarl, but another waits! Quick, behind ya!" Anton's voice carried over the rumble of the wagons. Knowing Anton's intent, Tarl grabbed the hammer, dropped to the ground, rolled, and threw the weapon at a white pine nearly twenty paces from where he lay. The hammer thunked into the tree's trunk just an inch from the ground.

"By Tyr, he'll be hoppin' for a day or two! Ya did some powerful damage to his foot, lad." Anton laughed as he approached Tarl.

"Even when ya throw from the ground—no, especially when ya throw from the ground—ya still need all the momentum your body can give ya. Channel your energy so the full strength of your torso is packed behind your throw. That way your arm snaps forward with the force of a released spring, and your hammer does the damage ya need it to." Anton took the smith's hammer from Tarl and dropped to the ground to demonstrate. The big man moved with a speed and ease that belied his giant stature. True to his instructions, his arm snapped like a spring, sending the hammer forward with a force Tarl hadn't realized even Anton could manage from his back. When the hammer thwacked into a nearby tree, the entire length of the trunk split, as if it had been struck by an axe.

It took all his concentration, but many tries later, Tarl felt the tightly wound tension and powerful release of the snap that Brother Anton had spoken of. Tarl's throw missed its mark by several inches, but he knew he would never forget the technique, the feel of power in the throw. He also knew that he had been lacking that energy even when he had thrown from a standing position. He continued his practice with renewed enthusiasm all through the afternoon and into the evening, feeling a growing sense of pride and accomplishment as his hammer thrummed through the air with newfound speed and energy.

Though he was no giant like Anton, Tarl was tall—easily six feet—and strong. Nevertheless, by the time the brothers stopped for the night, Tarl's arms, shoulders, and back ached from the repeated use of previously underworked muscles. When Brother Sontag sent him for water in the morning, Tarl could barely hoist the yoke to his shoulders. At Anton's suggestion, Tarl heated a poultice and spread it between his shoulder blades. Anton instructed the young cleric to lie down on his bedroll, and he massaged the tarlike substance into Tarl's back and shoulder blades with his huge hands. The medication from the poultice quickly spread a penetrating, rejuvenating warmth through his aching muscles.

"You've made the mistake of all young men," Brother Sontag said, sitting down beside Tarl and Anton. Sontag was the eldest of the clerics in the group and, as such, its leader. He often had a word of advice for Tarl or even some of the other brothers. "You let a single success possess you. For a day, the hammer was your master. When you go back and practice again, you will be the master."

"You said the same thing about the ball and chain, Brother Sontag. Do all weapons punish

us before we gain mastery over them?”

“Yes, Tarl, they do—and because you understand that, I believe you are ready for the Test of the Sword.”

Anton’s face paled noticeably. “Tarl’s just a pup—barely twenty, if I can count. What’s the rush, Brother Sontag?”

Sontag waved a hand toward Anton to silence him. “How many weapons have you mastered, Tarl?” Brother Sontag stared directly into the youth’s eyes as he asked the question.

Tarl thought for a moment. He knew of the Test of the Sword—that it was the final challenge he must face before becoming a full-fledged cleric in the Order of Tyr—but the nature of the test was a secret. For all he knew, Sontag’s question could even be part of the test. Tarl sat up, squared his shoulders, and returned the elderly cleric’s piercing gaze. “I can master better my use of any weapon, Brother Sontag, but you yourself have told me I have mastered the ball and chain and that I will master the hammer. I believe, then, by my feelings, that I can also say I have mastered the shield.”

“And the sword, Tarl? Have you mastered the sword?” Sontag prompted.

Tarl laughed nervously. “Of course not. The clerics of Tyr don’t carry swords. There’s no one here who can teach—”

“Wrong, Tarl. You knew that was wrong before you even spoke the words. Didn’t you wield a sword before you took your vows?”

“Sure, I used a sword,” Tarl answered self-consciously, aware that Brothers Donal, Adrian, Sheriff, and the rest had gathered round to listen.

“And did you master it?” Sontag asked, his wizened eyes glittering.

“I—I guess I was pretty good. Of course, I didn’t have the kind of intensive training I’ve received from all of you with the other weapons.” Tarl was no longer looking at Brother Sontag. He felt that somehow everything he said was wrong. During the months since he had taken his vows, he had asked more than once why clerics of Tyr couldn’t use swords. Each time the response had been silence or a gruff “You’ll know soon enough.” Swords were wonderful weapons, certainly easier to wield than any of the weapons favored by the clerics of Tyr. Tarl was deeply committed to Tyr and the order, but he had always assumed that the clerics’ refusal to use swords was some quirk of fanaticism of the type that seems to infiltrate almost any religious order.

“We all wielded swords before we joined the order, Tarl. There are men among us who could teach you proficiency with a sword, if you wanted to learn.”

“I do want to learn, Brother Sontag. Swords are fine weapons. It’s a shame the warriors of Tyr don’t learn to use them.” Tarl’s heart pounded with both enthusiasm and trepidation as he launched into the argument he had rehearsed mentally a dozen times. “A man with a sword can easily disarm a man with a ball and chain, num-chucks, or a throwing hammer just by the proper timing of his thrust. And a kill with a sword is clean. There’s no need for bludgeoning—”

Brother Sontag waved his hand at Tarl as he had at Anton a few moments earlier, then stood and walked toward the lead wagon. The clerics that were gathered round parted to let him pass. None spoke or moved to his aid, even as he returned with a large leather bag that was obviously very heavy. “Can I help you with that?” asked Tarl, dropping the poultice.

he stood and held out a hand toward Sontag.

“No.” It was Anton who answered the question. “It’s Brother Sontag’s job. He’s the oldest among us.”

“What’s his job?” asked Tarl. He dropped his hand to his side and backed up several steps, feeling once again that he could say nothing right.

“To administer the test,” said Anton. “When a cleric of Tyr can’t give the test anymore, he retires.”

Sontag untied the bag and pulled out a long silver cord. “Stand still,” he said to Tarl coldly. The old cleric placed one end of the cord on the ground several feet from Tarl and then proceeded to lay it in a perfect circle around the young cleric.

Tarl felt a chill run up his spine as Sontag closed the circle. He felt trapped, though he knew that was ridiculous. He could step over the cord at any time. Or could he? For some reason, he couldn’t, but he didn’t know why. “Isn’t anyone going to tell me what’s expected of me?”

“You can ask all the questions you want once the test begins,” Anton said.

Sontag pulled two swords from the bag, a long sword and a short sword, and placed them at the edge of the circle. He did the same with two more, a broadsword and a two-handed sword, and then with two more, one a jousting sword and the other a fencing sword. There were all fine weapons of the highest quality. Tarl felt compelled to touch and lift each one. When he was through, he stepped back to the center of the circle.

All the clerics except Sontag formed a circle around the cord, then faced Tarl and stepped back three paces. Tarl watched, curiously, as they rolled up their sleeves and leggings. Was this being done to intimidate him? Tarl wondered, noting the many gruesome battle scars that marred the skin of each man.

Brother Sontag picked up his ball and chain and stood within the circle of men but stayed outside the cord. “Choose your weapon, Tarl,” said the old cleric. “You must kill me before you leave that circle—unless you pass the test.”

“I—I don’t want to kill you!” Tarl shouted, his voice breaking. Sontag slammed the ball inside the circle a scant two inches from Tarl’s feet. “Choose your weapon or die in the circle!”

Tarl leaped back and made a move to jump over the cord. Sontag swung again, hard and low. The chain wrapped around Tarl’s leg, and Sontag jerked back hard. Tarl slammed down on his left side, jamming his elbow on the rocky ground. Pain such as he had never known surged through his body, and Tarl cursed Tyr and all the other gods as he struggled to free his leg from the chain before Sontag could jerk it again. Tarl grappled for the pile of swords, then rose and turned on Sontag in fury as he got a firm grip on the broadsword.

“I’ll kill you!” Tarl screamed. The sword felt natural in his hand. He lunged forward and lashed out at Sontag, rage and pain guiding his movements. He felt the sword bite deep into the flesh just beneath Sontag’s breastplate. Sontag faltered for a moment, and Tarl tried once more to break out of the circle, but Sontag clipped him across his left shoulder with the ball, and Tarl fell hard inside the bounds of the cord. Hot jets of pain pulsed from his shoulder through the rest of his body, and he jumped up and lashed out wildly at Sontag. He lunged repeatedly, each time following the point of the sword with his body. Again and again Sontag dodged Tarl’s thrusts or deftly deflected them aside with his weapon.

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