


# The test of the twins

Fiction by Margaret Weis



*The twins Caramon (left) and Raistlin are central characters in the DRAGONLANCE saga. In this short story, the young mage Raistlin must pass great tests devised by long-dead sages and wizards. The outcome proves devastating for both Raistlin and his brother.*

The magician and his brother rode through the mists toward the secret place.

"We shouldn't have come," Caramon muttered. His large, strong hand was on the hilt of his great sword, and his eyes searched every shadow. "I have been in many dangerous places, but nothing to equal this!"

Raistlin glanced around. He noticed dark, twisted shadows and heard strange sounds.

"They will not bother us, brother," he said gently. "We have been invited. They are guardians who keep out the unwanted." He did, however, draw his red robes closer around his thin body and moved to ride nearer Caramon.

"Mages invited us . . . I don't trust 'em." Caramon scowled.

Raistlin glanced at him. "Does that include me, dear brother?" he asked softly.

Caramon did not reply.

Although twins; the two brothers could not have been more different. Raistlin, frail and sickly magician and scholar, pondered this difference frequently. They were one whole man split in two: Caramon the body, Raistlin the mind. As such, the two needed and depended on each other far more than other brothers. But, in some ways, it was an unwholesome dependence, for it was as if each was incomplete without the other. At least, this was how it seemed to Raistlin. He bitterly resented whatever gods had played such a trick which cursed him with a weak body when he longed for mastery over others. He was thankful that, at least, he had been granted the skills of a magician. It

gave him the power he craved. These skills almost made him the equal of his brother.

Caramon — strong and muscular, a born fighter — always laughed heartily whenever Raistlin discussed their differences. Caramon enjoyed being his "little" brother's protector. But, although he was very fond of Raistlin, Caramon pitied his weaker twin. Unfortunately, Caramon had a tendency to express his brotherly concern in unthoughtful ways. He often let his pity show, not realizing it was like a knife twisting in his brother's soul.

Caramon admired his brother's skill as a magician as one admires a festival juggler. He did not treat it seriously or respectfully. Caramon had met neither man nor monster that could not be handled by the sword. Therefore, he could not understand this

dangerous trip his brother was undertaking for the sake of his magic.

"It's all parlor tricks, Raist," Caramon protested. "Riding into that forsaken land is nothing to risk our lives over."

Raistlin replied gently — he always spoke gently to Caramon — that he was determined on this course of action for reasons of his own and that Caramon could come if he so chose. Of course, Caramon went. The two had rarely been separated from one another since their birth.

The journey was long and hazardous. Caramon's sword was frequently drawn. Raistlin felt his strength ebbing. They were near the end now. Raistlin rode in silence, oppressed with the doubt and fear that shrouded him as it had when he first decided on this course of action. Perhaps Caramon was right, perhaps he was risking their lives needlessly.

It had been three months ago when the Head of the Order arrived at his master's home. Par-Salian had invited Raistlin to visit with him as he dined — much to the master's surprise.

"When do you take the Test, Raistlin?" the old man asked the young conjurer.

"Test?" Raistlin repeated, startled. No need to ask which Test — there was only one

"He is not ready, Par-Salian," his master protested. "He is young — only twenty-one! His spellbook is far from complete —"

"Yes," Par-Salian interrupted, his eyes narrowing. "But you believe you are ready, don't you, Raistlin?"

Raistlin had kept his eyes lowered, in the proper show of humility, his hood drawn over his face. Suddenly, he threw back his hood and lifted his head, staring directly, proudly, at Par-Salian. "I am ready, Great One," Raistlin spoke coolly.

Par-Salian nodded, his eyes glittering. "Begin your journey in three months' time," the old man said, then went back to eating his fish.

Raistlin's master gave him a furious glance, rebuking him for his impudence. Par-Salian did not look at him again. The young conjurer bowed and left without a word.

The servant let him out; however, Raistlin slipped back through the unlocked door, cast a sleep spell upon the servant, and stood, hidden in the alcove, listening to the conversation between his master and Par-Salian.

"The Order has never tested one so young," the master said. "And you chose him! Of all my pupils, he is the most unworthy! I simply do not understand."

"You don't like him, do you?" Par-Salian asked mildly.

"No one does," the master snapped. "There is no compassion in him, no humanity. He is greedy and grasping, difficult to trust. Did you know that his nickname among the other students is the Sly One? He absorbs from everyone's soul and gives back nothing of his own. His eyes are mir-

rors; they reflect all he sees in cold, brittle terms."

"He is highly intelligent," Par-Salian suggested.

"Oh, there's no denying that," the master sniffed. "He is my best pupil. And he has a natural affinity for magic. Not one of those surface-users."

"Yes," Par-Salian agreed. "Raistlin's magic springs from deep within."

"But it springs from a dark well," the master said, shaking his head. "Sometimes I look at him and shudder, seeing the Black Robes fall upon him. That will be his destiny, I fear."

"I think not," Par-Salian said thoughtfully. "There is more to him than you see, though I admit he keeps it well hidden. More to him than he knows himself, I'll wager."

"Mmmmm," the master sounded very dubious.

Raistlin smiled to himself, a twisted smile. It came as no surprise to learn his master's true feelings. Raistlin sneered. Who cared, he thought bitterly. As for Par-Salian — Raistlin shrugged it off.

"What of his brother?" Par-Salian asked. Raistlin, his ear pressed against the door, frowned.

"Ah," the master became effusive. "Night and day. Caramon is handsome, honorable, trusting, everyone's friend. Theirs is a strange relationship. I have seen Raistlin watch Caramon with a fierce, burning love in his eyes. And the next instant, I have seen such hatred and jealousy I think the young man could murder his twin without giving it a second thought." He coughed, apologetically. "Let me send you Algenon, Great One. He is not as intelligent as Raistlin, but his heart is true and good."

"Algenon is too good," Par-Salian snorted. "He has never known torment or suffering or evil. Set him in a cold, biting wind and he will wither like a maiden's first rose. But Raistlin — well, one who constantly battles evil within will not be overly dismayed by evil without."

Raistlin heard chairs scrape. Par-Salian stood up.

"Let's not argue. I was given a choice to make and I have made it," Par-Salian said.

"Forgive me, Great One, I did not mean to be contradictory," the master said stiffly, hurt.

Raistlin heard Par-Salian sigh wearily. "I should be the one to apologize, old friend," he said. "Forgive me. There is trouble coming upon us that the world may well not survive. This choice has been a heavy burden upon me. As you know, the Test may well prove fatal to the young man."

"It has killed others more worthy," the master murmured.

Their conversation turned to other matters, so Raistlin crept away.

The young mage considered Par-Salian's words many times during the weeks that followed while he prepared for his journey.

Sometimes he would hug himself with pride at being chosen by the Great One to take the Test — the greatest honor conferred on a magician. But, at night, the words *may well prove fatal* haunted his dreams.

He thought, as he drew nearer and nearer the Towers, about those who had not survived. Their belongings had been returned to their families, without a single word (other than Par-Salian's regrets). For

## Dragonlance

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As a preview to the DRAGONLANCE story, DRAGON® Magazine will introduce some of the Heroes of the Lance in a series of short stories. This story, about the twins Raistlin and Caramon, is the first of those.

this reason, many magicians did not take the Test. After all, it gave no additional power. It added no spells to the spellbook. One could practice magic quite well without it, and many did so. But they were not considered "true" magic-users by their peers, and they knew it. The Test gave a mage an aura that surrounded him, exuded from him. When entering the presence of others, this aura was deeply felt by all and, therefore, commanded respect.

Raistlin hungered for that respect. But did he hunger for it enough to be willing to die trying to obtain it?

"There it is!" Caramon interrupted his thoughts, reining his horse in sharply.

"The fabled Towers of High Sorcery," Raistlin said, staring in awe.

The two tall stone towers resembled

skeletal fingers, clawing out of the grave.

"We could turn back now," Caramon croaked, his voice breaking.

Raistlin looked at his brother in astonishment. For the first time since he could remember, Raistlin saw fear in Caramon. The young conjurer felt an unusual sensation — a warmth spread over him. He reached out and put a steady hand on his brother's trembling arm. "Do not be afraid, Caramon," Raistlin said. "I am with you."

Caramon looked at Raistlin, then laughed nervously to himself. He urged his horse forward.

The two entered the Tower. Vast stone walls and darkness swallowed them up, then they heard the voice: "Approach."

The two walked ahead. Raistlin walked steadfastly, but Caramon moved warily, his hand on the hilt of his sword. They came to stand before a withered figure sitting in the center of a cold, empty chamber.

"Welcome, Raistlin," Par-Salian said. "Do you consider yourself prepared to undergo your final Test?"

"I do, Par-Salian, Greatest of Them All." Par-Salian studied the young man before him. The conjurer's pale, thin cheeks were stained with a faint flush, as though fever burned in his blood. "Who accompanies you?" Par-Salian asked.

"My twin brother Caramon, Great Mage." Raistlin's mouth twisted into a snarl. "As you see, Great One, I am no fighter. My brother came to protect me."

Par-Salian stared at the brothers, reflecting on the odd humor of the gods. Twins! *This Caramon is huge. Six feet tall, he must weigh over two hundred pounds. His face — a face of smiles and boisterous laughter; the eyes are as open as his heart. Poor Raistlin.*

Par-Salian turned his gaze back to the young man whose red robes hung from thin, stooped shoulders. Obviously weak, Raistlin was one who could never take what he wanted, so he had learned, long ago, that magic could compensate for his deficiencies. Par-Salian looked into the eyes. No, they were not mirrors as the master had said — not for those with the power to see deeply. There was good inside the young man — an inner core of strength that would enable his fragile body to endure much. But now his soul was a cold, shapeless mass, dark with pride, greed, and selfishness. Therefore, as a shapeless mass of metal is plunged into a white-hot fire and emerges shining steel, so Par-Salian intended to forge this conjurer.

"Your brother cannot stay," the Mage admonished softly.

"I am aware of that, Great One," Raistlin replied with a hint of impatience.

"He will be well cared for in your absence," Par-Salian continued. "And, of course, he will be allowed to carry home your valuables should the test prove beyond your skill."

"Carry home . . . valuables . . ." Caramon's face became grim as he considered

this statement. Then it darkened as he understood the full meaning of the Mage's words. "You mean —"

Raistlin's voice cut in, sharp, edged. "He means, dear brother, that you will take home my possessions in the event of my death."

Par-Salian shrugged.

"Failure, invariably, proves fatal."

"Yes, you're right. I forgot that death could be a result of this . . . ritual." Caramon's face crumpled into wrinkles of fear. He laid his hand on his brother's arm. "I think you should forget this, Raist. Let's go home."

Raistlin twitched at his brother's touch, his thin body shuddering. "Do I counsel you to refuse battle?" he flared. Then, controlling his anger, he continued more calmly. "This is my battle, Caramon. Do not worry. I will not fail."

Caramon pleaded. "Please, Raist . . . I'm supposed to take care of you —"

"Leave me!" Raistlin's control cracked, splintered, wounding his brother.

Caramon fell backward. "All right," he mumbled. "I'll . . . I'll meet you . . . outside." He flashed the Mage a threatening glance. Then he turned and walked out of the chamber, his huge battlesword clanking against his thigh.

A door thudded, then there was silence.

"I apologize for my brother," Raistlin said, his lips barely moving.

"Do you?" Par-Salian asked. "Why?"

The young man scowled. "Because he always . . . Oh, can't we just get on with this?" His hands clenched beneath the sleeves of his robe.

"Of course," the Mage replied, leaning back in his chair.

Raistlin stood straight, eyes open and unblinking. Then he drew in a sharp breath.

The Mage made a gesture. There was a sound, a shattering crack. Quickly, the conjurer vanished.

*A voice spoke from the nether regions. "Why must we test this one so severely?"*

*Par-Salian's twisted hands clasped and unclasped. "Who questions the gods?" he frowned. "They demanded a sword. I found one, but his metal is white hot. He must be beaten . . . tempered. . . made useful."*

*"And if he breaks?"*

*"Then we will bury the pieces," murmured the Mage.*

Raistlin dragged himself away from the dead body of the dark elf. Wounded and exhausted, he crawled into a shadowy corridor and slumped against a wall. Pain twisted him. He clutched his stomach and retched. When the convulsion subsided, he lay back on the stone floor and waited for death.

*Why are they doing this to me?* he wondered through a dreamy haze of pain. Only a young conjurer, he had been subjected to trials devised by the most renowned Mages

— living and dead. The fact that he must pass these tests was no longer his main thought; survival, however, was. Each trial had wounded him, and his health had always been precarious. If he survived this ordeal — and he doubted he would — he could imagine his body to be like a shattered crystal, held together by the force of his own will.

But then, of course, there was Caramon, who would care for him — as always.

*Ha!* The thought penetrated the haze, even made Raistlin laugh harshly. No, death was preferable to a life of total dependence on his brother. Raistlin lay back on the stone floor, wondering how much longer they would let him suffer. . . .

. . . And a huge figure materialized out of the shadowy darkness of the corridor.

*This is it, Raistlin thought, my final test. The one I won't survive.*

He decided simply not to fight, even though he had one spell left. Maybe death would be quick and merciful.

He lay on his back, staring at the dark shadow as it drew closer and closer. It came to stand next to him. He could sense its living presence, hear its breathing. It bent over him. Involuntarily, he closed his eyes.

"Raist?"

He felt cold fingers touch his burning flesh.

"Raist!" the voice sobbed. "In the name of the gods, what have they done to you?"

"Caramon," Raistlin spoke, but he couldn't hear his own voice. His throat was raw from coughing.

"I'm taking you out of here," his brother announced firmly.

Raistlin felt strong arms slip under his body. He smelled the familiar smell of sweat and leather, heard the familiar sound of armor creak and broadsword clank.

"No!" In an effort not to show his belief that he had failed to Caramon, Raistlin pushed against his brother's massive chest with a frail, fragile hand. "Leave me, Caramon! My tests are not complete! Leave me!" His voice was an inaudible croak, then he gagged violently.

Caramon lifted him easily, cradled him in his strong arms. "Nothing is worth this. Rest easy, Raist." The big man choked. As they walked under a flickering torch, Raistlin could see tears on his brother's cheeks. He made one last effort.

"They won't allow us to go, Caramon!" He raised his head, gasping for breath. "You're only putting yourself in danger!"

"Let them come," Caramon said grimly, walking with firm steps down the dimly lit corridor.

Raistlin sank back, helpless, his head resting on Caramon's shoulder. He felt comforted by his brother's strength, though he cursed him inwardly.

*You fool!* Raistlin closed his eyes wearily. *You great, stubborn fool! Now we'll both die. And, of course, you will die protecting me. Even in death I'll be indebted to you!*

"Ah . . ."

Raistlin heard and felt the sharp intake of

breath into his brother's body. Caramon's walk had slowed. Raistlin raised his head and peered ahead.

"A wraith," he breathed.

"Mmmmm . . ." Caramon rumbled deeply in his chest — his battle-cry.

"My magic can destroy it," Raistlin protested as Caramon laid him gently on the stone floor. *Burning Hands*, Raistlin thought grimly. A weak spell against a wraith, but he had to try. "Move, Caramon! I have just enough strength left."

Caramon did not answer. He turned around and walked toward the wraith, blocking Raistlin's view.

Clinging to the wall, the conjurer clawed his way to a standing position and raised his hand. Just as he was about to expend his strength in one last shout, hoping to warn off his brother, he stopped and stared in disbelief. Caramon raised his hand. Where before he had held a sword, now he held a rod of amber. In the other hand, his shield hand, he held a bit of fur. He rubbed the two together, spoke some magic words — and a lightning bolt flashed, striking the wraith in the chest. It shrieked, but kept coming, intent on draining Caramon's life energy. Caramon kept his hands raised. He spoke again. Another bolt sizzled, catching the wraith in its head. And suddenly there was nothing.

"Now we'll get out of here," Caramon said with satisfaction. The rod and the fur were gone. He turned around. "The door is just ahead —"

"How did you do that?" Raistlin said, propping himself up against the wall.

Caramon halted, alarmed by his brother's wild, frenzied stare.

"Do what?" the fighter blinked.

"The magic!" Raistlin shrieked in fury. "The magic!"

"Oh, that," Caramon shrugged. "I've always been able to. Most of the time I don't need it, what with my sword and all, but you're hurt real bad and I've got to get you out of here. I didn't want to take time fighting that character. Don't bother about it, Raist. It can still be your little specialty. Like I said before, most of the time I don't need it."

*This is impossible, Raistlin's mind told him. He couldn't have acquired in moments what it took years of study to attain. This doesn't make sense. Fight the sickness and the weakness and the pain! Think!*

## Write on!

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But it wasn't the physical pain that clouded Raistlin's mind. It was the old inner pain clawing at him, tearing at him with poisoned talons. Caramon, strong and cheerful, good and kind, open and honest. Everyone's friend.

Not like Raistlin — the runt, the sly one.

*All I ever had was my magic, Raistlin's mind shrieked. And now he has that too!*

Propping himself against the wall for support, Raistlin raised both his hands, put his thumbs together, and pointed them at Caramon. He began murmuring magic words, but different from those that Caramon had spoken.

"Raist?" Caramon backed up. "What are you doing? C'mon! Let me help you. I'll take care of you — just like always . . . Raist! I'm your brother!"

Raistlin's parched lips cracked in a grin. Hatred and jealousy — long kept bubbling and molten beneath a layer of cold, solid rock — burst forth. Magic coursed through his body and flamed out of his hands. He was astonished as he watched the fire flare, billow, and engulf Caramon. When the fighter became a living torch, Raistlin knew from his training that what he was seeing simply could not be. The instant that he realized something was wrong with this occurrence, the burning image of his brother vanished. A moment later, Raistlin lost consciousness and slumped to the ground.

"Awaken, Raistlin, your trials are complete."

Raistlin opened his eyes. The darkness was gone; sunshine streamed through a window. He lay in a bed. Looking down at him was the withered face of Par-Salian.

"Why?" Raistlin rasped, clutching at the Mage in fury. "Why did you do that to me?"

Par-Salian laid his hand on the frail young man's shoulder. "The gods asked for a sword, Raistlin, and now I can give them one — you. Evil is coming upon the land. The fate of all this world called Krynn swings in the balance. Through the aid of your hand and others, the balance will be restored."

Raistlin stared, then laughed, briefly and bitterly. "Save Krynn? How? You have shattered my body. I can't even see properly!" He stared in terror. . . .

. . . For, as Raistlin watched, he could see the Mage's face dying. Then, when he turned his gaze to the window, the stones he looked at crumbled before his eyes. Wherever he looked, everything was falling into ruin and decay. Then, the moment passed, and his vision cleared.

Par-Salian handed him a mirror. Raistlin saw that his own face was sunken and hollow. His skin was a golden color now, with a faint metallic cast; this would be a symbol of the agony he had endured. But it was his eyes that caused him to recoil in horror, for the black pupils were no longer round — they were the shape of hourglasses!

"You see through hourglass eyes now,

Raistlin. And so you see time, as it touches all things. You see death, whenever you look on life. Thus you will always be aware of the brief timespan we spend in the world." Par-Salian shook his head. "There will be no joy in your life, Raistlin, I fear — indeed, little joy for anyone living on Krynn." Raistlin laid the mirror face down. "My brother?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"It was an illusion that I created — my personal challenge for you to look deeper into your own heart and examine the ways in which you deal with those closest to you," Par-Salian said gently. "As for your brother, he is here, safe . . . quite safe. Here he comes now."

As Caramon entered the room, Raistlin sat up, shoving Par-Salian aside. Caramon appeared relieved to see that Raistlin had enough energy to greet him, but Caramon's eyes reflected a certain sadness that comes from learning an unpleasant truth.

"I didn't think you would want to recognize the illusion for what it was," Par-Salian said. "But you did; after all, what magic-user can work spells, carrying a sword or wearing armor?"

"Then I did not fail?" Raistlin murmured hoarsely.

"No," Par-Salian smiled. "The final of the Test was the defeat of the dark elf — truly superb for one of your experience."

Raistlin looked at his brother's haunted face, his averted eyes. "He watched me kill him, didn't he?" Raistlin whispered.

"Yes," Par-Salian looked from one to the other. "I am sorry I had to do this to you, Raistlin. You have much to learn, mage — mercy, compassion, forbearance. It is my hope that the trials you face ahead of you will teach you what you lack now. If not, you will succumb in the end to the fate your master foresaw. But, as of now, you and your brother truly know each other. The barriers between you have been battered down, though I am afraid each of you has suffered wounds in the encounter. I hope the scars make you stronger."

Par-Salian rose to leave. "Use your powers well, mage. The time is close at hand when your strength must save the world."

Raistlin bowed his head and sat in silence until Par-Salian had left the room. Then he stood up, leaning on a wooden staff. He staggered and nearly fell.

Caramon jumped forward. Raistlin met his brother's eyes. Caramon faltered, stopped.

Raistlin sighed. For long moments, there was no sound at all in the room. Then Raistlin felt his strength begin to give way. Pain wracked his body. He grew dizzy, shut his eyes to block their horrible vision. He held out his arms. "Help me, brother," the mage whispered, weeping. "Help me, Caramon."

"I'm here, Raist," his brother's voice was near him, then his brother's arms were around him, supporting him.

"Forgive me," both spoke together. ✕