

THE WISHSONG OF SHANNARA

TERRY BROOKS



BALLANTINE BOOKS

RED COILS OF EVIL

As Allanon turned to walk away, there was a sudden, terrifying explosion. A whirling mass of red fire engulfed the Druid, and he disappeared. Dazed and half blinded by the explosion, Brin Ohmsford struggled to her knees and shielded her eyes as she stared to where red fire burned all about Allanon, wrapping him in crimson coils and flaring out wickedly. Within the fire, the Druid was hunched down against the shimmering black rock of the valley floor, barely holding back the flames with a faint blue aura.

Desperately, she sought the maker of that horror and found it not twenty yards away. There, stark against the dawn's faint light, a tall black form stood silhouetted, arms raised and leveled, with the red fire spurting forth.

She knew immediately what it was—a Mord Wraith, foul minion of the evil Ildatch!

It had come upon them without a sound, caught them unawares, and struck down the Druid. With no chance to defend himself, Allanon was alive now only through his instinctive response of the blue shield. But how much longer could he survive against that crimson blast that was turning all the world to bloody fire?

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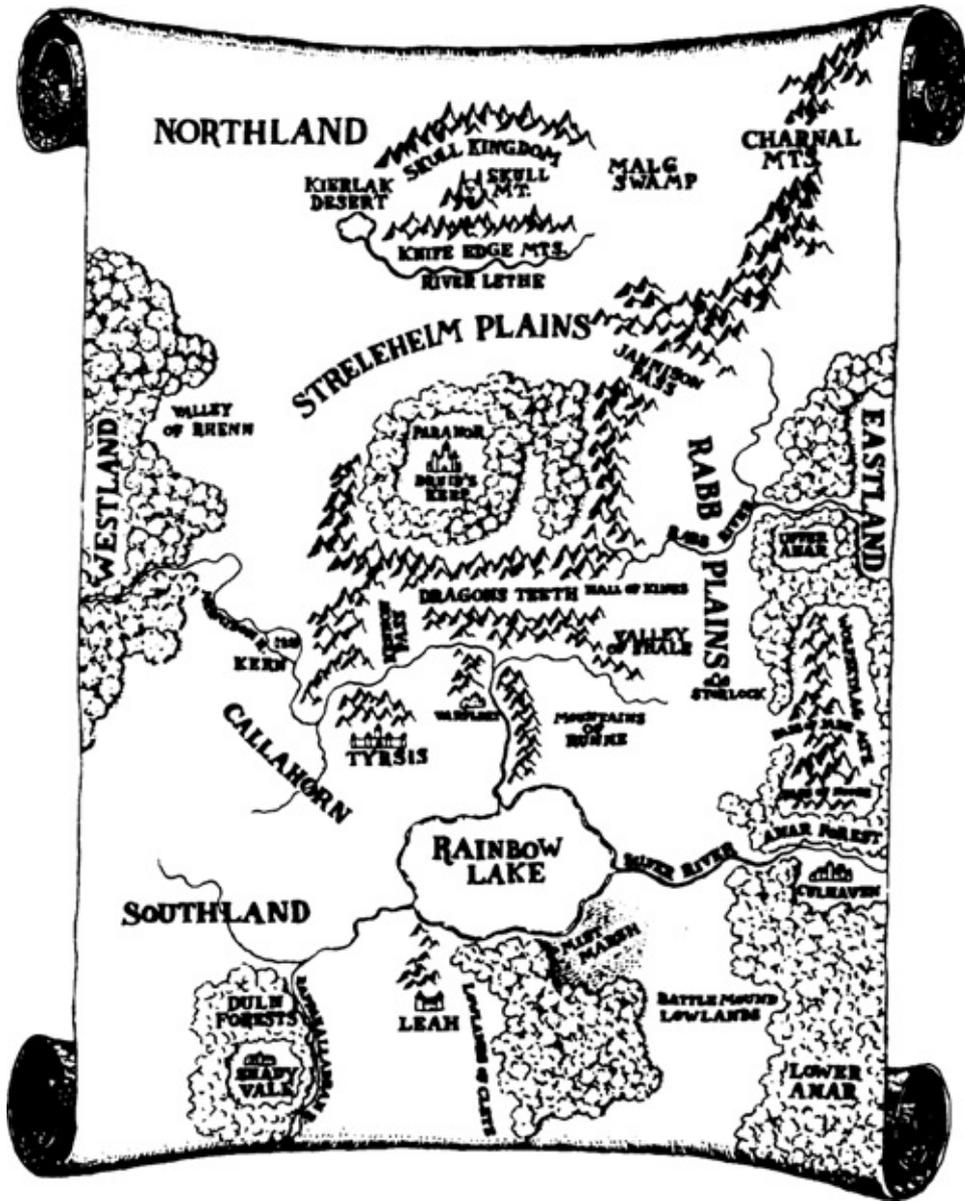
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I

A change of seasons was upon the Four Lands as late summer faded slowly into autumn. Gone were the long, still days of midyear where sweltering heat slowed the pace of life and there was a sense of having time enough for anything. Though summer's warmth lingered, the days had begun to shorten, the humid air to dry, and the memory of life's immediacy to reawaken. The signs of transition were all about. In the forests of Shady Vale, the leaves had already begun to turn.

Brin Ohmsford paused by the flowerbeds that bordered the front walkway of her home, losing herself momentarily in the crimson foliage of the old maple that shaded the yard beyond. It was a massive thing, its trunk broad and gnarled. Brin smiled. That old tree was the source of many childhood memories for her. Impulsively, she stepped off the walkway and moved over to the aged tree.

She was a tall girl—taller than her parents or her brother Jair, nearly as tall as Rone Leah—and although there was a delicate look to her slim body, she was as fit as any of them. Jair would argue the point of course, but that was only because Jair found it hard enough as it was to accept his role as the youngest. A girl, after all, was just a girl.

Her fingers touched the roughened trunk of the maple softly, caressing, and she stared upward into the tangle of limbs overhead. Long, black hair fell away from her face and there was no mistaking whose child she was. Twenty years ago, Eretria had looked exactly as her daughter looked now, from dusky skin and black eyes to soft, delicate features. All that Brin lacked was her mother's fire. Jair had gotten that. Brin had her father's temperament, cool, self-assured, and disciplined. In comparing his children one time—a time occasioned by one of Jair's more reprehensible misadventures—Wil Ohmsford had remarked rather ruefully that the difference between the two was that Jair was apt to do anything, while Brin was also apt to do it, but only after thinking it through first. Brin still wasn't sure who had come out on the short end of that reprimand.

Her hands slipped back to her sides. She remembered the time she had used the wishsong on the old tree. She had still been a child, experimenting with the Elven magic. It had been midsummer and she had used the wishsong to turn the tree's summer green to autumn crimson; in her child's mind, it seemed perfectly all right to do so, since red was a far prettier color than green. Her father had been furious; it had taken almost three years for the tree to come back again after the shock to its system. That had been the last time either she or Jair had used the magic when their parents were about.

“Brin, come help me with the rest of the packing, please.”

It was her mother calling. She gave the old maple a final pat and turned toward the house.

Her father had never fully trusted the Elven magic. A little more than twenty years earlier he had used the Elfstones given him by the Druid Allanon in his efforts to protect the Elven Chosen Amberle Elesedil in her quest for the Bloodfire. Use of the Elven magic had changed him; he had known it even then, though not known how. It was only after Brin was born, and later Jair, that it became apparent what had been done. It was not Wil Ohmsford who would manifest the change the magic had wrought; it was his children. They were the ones who would carry within them the visible effects of the magic—they, and perhaps generations of Ohmsfords to come, although there was no way of ascertaining yet that they would carry within them the magic of the wishsong.

Brin had named it the wishsong. Wish for it, sing for it, and it was yours. That was how it had seemed to her when she had first discovered that she possessed the power. She learned early that she could affect the behavior of living things with her song. She could change that old maple’s leaves. She could soothe an angry dog. She could bring a wild bird to light on her wrist. She could make herself a part of any living thing—or make it a part of her. She wasn’t sure how she did it; it simply happened. She would sing, the music and the words coming as they always did, unplanned, unrehearsed—as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She was always aware of what she was singing, yet at the same time heedless, her mind caught up in feelings of indescribable sensation. They would sweep through her, drawing her in, making her somehow new again, and the wish would come to pass.

It was the gift of the Elven magic—or its curse. The latter was how her father had viewed it when he had discovered she possessed it. Brin knew that, deep inside, he was frightened of what the Elfstones could do and what he had felt them do to him. After Brin had caused the family dog to chase its tail until it nearly dropped and had wilted an entire garden of vegetables, her father had been quick to reassert his decision that the Elfstones would never be used again by anyone. He had hidden them, telling no one where they could be found, and hidden they had remained ever since. At least, that was what her father thought. She was not altogether certain. One time, not too many months earlier, when there was mention of the hidden Elfstones, Brin had caught Jair smiling rather smugly. He would not admit to anything, of course, but she knew how difficult it was to keep anything hidden from her brother, and she suspected he had found the hiding place.

Rone Leah met her at the front door, tall and rangy, rust brown hair loose about his shoulders and tied back with a broad headband. Mischievous gray eyes narrowed appraisingly. “How about lending a hand, huh? I’m doing all the work and I’m not even a member of the family, for cat’s sake!”

“As much time as you spend here, you ought to be,” she chided. “What’s left to be done?”