

Teachers' Notes

These notes can be photocopied for use in the class.

Following is the short story from which *The Jelindel Chronicles* grew. Teachers may prefer their students to examine the short story as an alternative to the longer novel, or use it as an inside 'glimpse' into the writing process undertaken by the author. For a more in depth study go to *Dragonlinks*.

The Weakest Link

by

Paul Collins in collaboration with Sean McMullen

A chill and vicious wind lashed across the dusty plain known as Dragonfrost, a vast basin of red sand and granite bordered by the Algon Mountain Ranges. Daretor huddled further over the saddle, throwing a glance back to Tannard who was riding behind him. Tannard, the man with no past, was well informed – too well informed for Daretor's liking. Together they had attacked the escort and stolen the link ... the link.

Daretor cautiously opened his fingers and studied the link, a small ring of metal in the palm of his hand. It was neither gold nor silver, yet it had a sheen, a lustre that belonged to a precious metal. Its colour was that of polished silver, yet the highlights shone with an orange tinge.

Again he wondered at its icy touch. Clutched in his hand, as it had been since he had procured it, it should have been warm, yet its coldness chilled his hand as if he were holding a lump of ice.

"A rare thing, and rare things have value," he said to himself beneath the roaring wind.

Daretor turned in the saddle and frowned. Through the swirling sandstorm he could see the dark shadow that was Tannard. He clenched his fist. There was no trusting the man now that he had the link. Surely it was his right to wear it – the pair of them had equal chances against six of the King's guardsmen. If Tannard had wrested it from its case first, then surely he would now be in charge of it.

Daretor's face darkened. How long would it be before Tannard made a play for the link?

Presently Daretor sighted the blurred outline of the foothills. He sighed with relief, then nudged his grey stallion to a faster walk. The sooner he was out of this accursed place the better. Despite the howling wind, he was sure he could hear Tannard's gelding whicker when heels met flanks.

The grass and streams of the hills were like paradise after the bleak, dusty chill of Dragonfrost. The two riders soon stopped to rest their horses, and Daretor was full of questions for his enigmatic partner.

"We came by this link too easily," muttered Daretor. "You say it has the power to make and break empires."

Tannard smiled easily. "So the legend goes," he replied.

"If its powers are so great, why did we drive off its guards too easily?"

"Why do you think the guardsmen carried it in a chest?" said Tannard with a dismissive shrug. "The King's no fool. Those poor yokels never knew what they were carrying. You have to know how to use it to tap its power."

"And you know how to do that?"

“Aye.”

The answer was plausible, and Daretor relaxed a little. “If this one link is so powerful –imagine the mailshirt it came from,” Daretor said wistfully.

“Aye. It has the fighting skills of many hundreds of dead warriors trapped in its individual links.”

“Or so the story goes,” Daretor said suspiciously.

Tannard smiled. “The link you have there is from that mailshirt.” He let the words hang until Daretor signalled him to continue – a story he had repeated several times now. “But without all the links, the mailshirt’s magic is diminished and the wearer is more vulnerable.”

“A gleeman’s fable perhaps?”

Tannard laughed heartily. “More than a fable, good friend. Come now, let me show you.” He held out his hand for the link.

“Stay your distance!” Daretor hissed.

Tannard shrugged again and sat back in the grass.

“What proof have you that this link is potent?” asked Daretor, curious to know how to use it in spite of his suspicions.

Tannard pursed his lips in reflection. “Try putting the link on your finger, like a ring.”

“It’s too small.”

“Try the lesser finger of your right hand.”

To Daretor’s surprise, he found the link fitted. He turned his hand about, staring at it suspiciously. It was almost as if it were a little bigger than it had been. He noticed that it no longer felt cold, yet there was still an odd, tingling sensation about it.

“Now, have you ever used one of these?” asked Tannard, holding up a sharply pointed dagger with a weighted handle.

Daretor’s hand immediately went to the axe slung at his hip. “A Hamarian throwing knife. A coward’s weapon,” he added distastefully.

“A weapon with which you have no skill.”

“A weapon that holds no interest for me.”

“Which you cannot use.”

“I can throw a knife if I have to,” Daretor said cautiously. If need be, he could dodge Tannard’s knife-thrust and pull the axe from his own belt in the same movement.

Tannard took a white chalk from his pouch and idly paced out twenty steps. He drew a small, white circle with a dot about the size of his thumb on the trunk of a burbank tree. Returning, he handed the throwing knife haft-first to Daretor.

“Do me the favour of throwing to hit that circle,” he said.

Daretor grunted, then hefted the knife, gripped it by the point, and held it high. “I’ll be lucky to even hit the trunk. If I miss, your knife might as well be lost in those thorn bushes beyond.”

“I’ll risk that. Throw.”

Daretor’s arm sliced the air and the knife thudded into the trunk. It had found the dead centre of the white chalk mark.

“A fluke,” said Daretor, but there was a quaver in his voice.

“Try again,” said Tannard as he brought the knife back.

Daretor did so three more times with the same result. “An enchanted knife,” he said. He drew a heavy hunting knife from his boot and flung it. The point dug in at the edge of the circle.

“Are you convinced as yet?” asked Tannard, walking back with the two knives.

Daretor had slipped the link from his finger as Tannard approached. Without a word he took his knife from Tannard and flung it at the target. It missed the tree by at least a handspan and vanished into the thorn bushes.

Tannard winced. “A cheap lesson. No enchantment, except in the link,” he said as he sheathed his own knife.

Daretor’s eyes narrowed. “Then why is it that you are not more possessive of this magic link?”

Tannard shrugged. “You northerners are so suspicious. You have not known me long yet you distrust me already. There will be greater riches to be gained from our partnership. The link is nothing.”

“Oh?”

Tannard averted his eyes from Daretor’s clenched fist. “That link belongs to a mailshirt. Yes? It was on its way to Fa’red’s – the merchant in D’loom.”

“And?” Daretor could feel his heart pumping with urgency. Surely the merchant would be well guarded! But the mailshirt – he must have it!

“Had I not met you when I did, I may well have employed mercenaries. But he who travels with dogs, risks fleas. They may well have turned on me.” He cast meditative eyes on Daretor. “I needed someone I could trust.” He smiled quickly. “The legend goes that he who follows the wearer of the mailshirt is doubly blessed. There is a certain amount of protection in being a shadow, rather than the focus – if you gather what I mean.”

“So when the mailshirt is complete with this missing link, it will make its wearer unstoppable?”

“No ... but very nearly unstoppable. The main danger is in over-confidence.”

“Yet Fa’red had it guarded by a half-dozen lackeys who near ran at the sight of us?”

Tannard laughed. “It would seem Fa’red weighed his chances. A strongly guarded treasure would attract far more attention, and thus greater adversaries than us. His half-dozen men were unobtrusive. They could have been out hunting, for all their appearance.”

“Yet you knew differently?”

“That I did,” Tannard said. He turned and began collecting fire-brush and wood. While he went about his business, Daretor sat and pondered a great many things.

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The wind that blew in across the harbour of D’loom carried with it more than the tang of salt air, but if either Daretor or Tannard noticed the wafting smell of raw sewage and decaying vegetables from the markets, neither showed it. Right now it was more the aroma of mulled wine and smoke from the open fire baking a pig that occupied Daretor, yet he was edgy with impatience.

“Why are we here?” he asked yet again.

Tannard quaffed the last of his mead and slammed the tankard upon the table for service. “Since the pirate raids, D’loom is no longer a profitable port of call for the merchant ships. Yes?”

Daretor nodded silence acquiescence. It was common knowledge that there were more pirates operating along the Skelt Coast than anywhere in the known world. The myriad archipelagos that dotted the coast proved to be safe haven from the King’s dwindling fleet of

sloops. Losses were so severe that the once bountiful merchant trade was now conducted further inland.

“So?”

A plump serving girl swirled past and crashed two full tankards on the table. She plucked the coin from Tannard’s open palm without so much as a look at the man.

“It’s safer for us to appear besotted by night’s end, weaving and carousing like these other oafs.”

Daretor grunted sullenly. “You seem to know D’loom like the back of your hand,” he said mistrustingly.

“I have friends here; they’ve written of it to me.”

“Including the blacksmith,” Daretor articulated slowly. “When will you contact him?”

Tannard pursed his lips. “He knows of our presence, and that shall suffice.” He grinned, then roared with laughter. Daretor joined in, all the while thinking that it seemed so out of character for Tannard.

The night wore on and the pair became noticeably drunk. Tannard pulled a passing serving girl down into his lap and ran a hand up her leg, not heeding whether her screams were of delight or outrage. The landlord, a beer-gutted giant of a man, drove through the crowd like a wedge then stopped to tower above Tannard and Daretor.

“I take it the two of ye will be retiring now?” he said evenly. Arms crossed and gnarled, glaring face, he left no room for argument.

Tannard let go of the girl, who slapped his face and flounced off. He tried to stand, but fell helplessly, his hands catching at the table to break his fall. Daretor reached out and clasped him by the shoulder as he swung about to face the landlord.

“Aye,” he slurred. “It’s to sleep it off we be.”

It wasn’t until they reached the stairs that the room once again resumed its relaxed hubbub.

Tannard took a quick glance along the corridor before slamming the door shut. He smiled at Daretor’s bloodshot eyes. “You were supposed to pretend drunkenness, friend, not become consumed by it!”

“Mead affects my head,” Daretor said, wishing the pounding at his temples would cease. The room spun in a lazy circle and he cautiously made his way to the bed.

Tannard pulled the hessian curtains across the single pane of waxpaper. Despite the noise from the taproom downstairs, and the commotion from the docks as ships were loaded to sail with the tide, he knew Daretor would sleep well. There was plenty of time for him to visit the blacksmith’s shop without Daretor being any the wiser.

Hours later Tannard shook Daretor awake.

“Wha – ?”

Tannard clamped his hand about Daretor’s mouth. “It’s time.”

Daretor brushed Tannard’s hand away. He swung his legs over the bed and shook his head as though to clear it. He didn’t come fully awake until a thought seized him and he quickly looked at his little finger.

Tannard sighed heavily. “The link is yours. I could have taken it, but I’m happy with my lot.”

Daretor said nothing as they descended the stairwell and out into the cold night. He still had his doubts.

“And what of this merchant who employs mercenaries and owns such valuable things? I’ll wager the mailshirt is well guarded!”

“Then you would lose your coin,” Tannard said, his breath condensing to mist as it left his mouth. He pulled his leather jerkin closer to his body. “My informant tells me he guards it himself; he distrusts even his closest allies.” His lips curled back in a smile to reveal yellowed teeth by the light of a smoky street lantern. “It shall be his undoing.”

“And what if he is wearing the mailshirt?” Daretor said as he scurried after Tannard.

“Then he is a bigger fool than I suspect,” Tannard said easily. “Would you sleep in a mailshirt?”

It was Tannard’s sureness of foot that fuelled much of Daretor’s distrust. That and ownership of the link. If Tannard was unfamiliar with this coastal town, his knowledge of its back streets was something uncanny. Daretor suspected treachery, and almost of their own accord his fingers loosened the leather thonging of the axe at his belt. He lifted his sword a hand span in its scabbard, then let it drop. He was as ready as he could be for whatever lay ahead.

At length Tannard paused beneath an archway that spanned a cobbled courtyard. Wan light from distant street lanterns cast murky shadows as the pair slipped inside. Tannard drew a slender wire, then looked about before scurrying to a locked door. He spent mere seconds at the lock before muttering an inaudible curse. Next he produced another wire from which he fashioned a hook. Inserting this yielded better results.

He opened the door only so wide as to allow them access, then jammed some cloth into the catch before pulling it shut.

“Black Quell himself must be afoot tonight!” Daretor complained. His teeth chattered before he could clench them.

Tannard passed several rooms before pausing at one. “It’s in here. I feel it in my bones!”

He turned even as Daretor gasped in shock.

“Quiet! You’ll have the guards upon us!”

“Look at the link!” Daretor hissed in disbelief. “It’s glowing!”

Tannard smiled wolfishly. “So that part of the legend is true, too.”

“What part – ?”

“Quick! There’s no time for dallying. Even now the mailshirt might be glowing to warn its owner.”

Daretor felt an icy fear run its course. “Tannard – ”

But the man had already unlocked the door and slipped inside. Daretor followed.

It was stygian black inside the room when Tannard closed the door behind them – but not quite. From within an adjacent room there emanated a reddish glow that seemed to beckon them.

There was a grunt from a four-poster bed and Daretor barely managed to stifle an exclamation. He was a woodsman, not cutthroat or thief! Whatever had possessed him to follow this man? The bed’s springs creaked alarmingly and something huge and menacing rose from the covers.

“Hold!” the man’s voice boomed. Daretor heard rather than saw the sword as it sliced toward him. He stumbled backwards as he felt a tugging at his coat. His feet lost their purchase on the rug and before he knew it something huge was looming over him. More through instinct than expertise he thought to grab the rug and jerk it from under the merchant’s feet.

The man bellowed as he too fell. Daretor and the merchant fought on their knees in the near-darkness. Their swords clanged and rang like a tuneless peal of handbells, missing flesh but cutting chips of wood from the furniture.

Tannard heaved a heavy base at the larger of the two shadows, and it shattered on impact with the merchant's head.

"No!" Daretor said when Tannard drew his knife. "I'll not be party to murder!"

Tannard considered this for a moment. "Would you have that alive to pursue you once he revives?"

"With the mailshirt complete I will be in no danger," Daretor replied at once.

The corner of Tannard's mouth widened into a smile and his teeth gleamed in the light from the enchanted mailshirt. "So ... I suspect you're fool enough to do so. Very well." He sheathed the knife and hefted a bundle wrapped in fabric. "We're not safe until the mailshirt is complete. Hurry, we have little time."

They hadn't reached the door when a guard came bursting through. He held a sputtering torch high and in that brief moment had time to realise his mistake. Tannard's knife found its mark. The man crashed backwards.

"Out, man!" Tannard said urgently. "Don't stand there like a fool!"

Daretor stepped over the man. He was dimly aware of Tannard pausing to retrieve his knife from the guard's throat, but he soon caught up. They ran, heedless of the ensuing noise. Panicked voices rent the night air while something glowed brighter and brighter behind them.

"You torched the house!" gasped Daretor.

"Pah, the darkness was annoying me."

Tannard stopped before a blacksmith's shop, and to Daretor's surprise, produced a key to open the great wooden doors. Inside, the coals of the forge were glowing dull red. It was damnably hot, but the lack of anyone else in the shop made him more uneasy than the heat.

No longer able to maintain even a shred of trust, he drew his sword and motioned Tannard away from the bundle at his feet. "Where's the smithy?" he rumbled. He raised the point of his sword to touch Tannard's throat. "Tell him to come out. Now!"

Tannard raised his hands. "Come out, smithy, it's all right!" he called. Silence was his reply. "See. No trap. I paid the smithy to spend an hour or two at the tavern. Ah, Daretor, your distrust offends me. Have I not given you everything, have I ever lied to you?"

"The stakes have not as yet been so very high. Stand back, then. Right back! What is to stop you putting on the mailshirt and defeating me with the combined fighting skills of the links that make up its fabric?"

"I am making no claim to it," Tannard said. "It is, quite simply, yours."

Daretor undid the leather thonging that had tied his axehead to his belt and took the mailshirt from the bag. It was glowing orange. He began to lace up the neck of the chainmail shirt. All the while he kept a wary eye on Tannard. His accomplice stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded, looking more amused than angry.

"There," Daretor said at length. "Now do your work."

"Very well," Tannard said as he came slowly over. "I'll use the link to repair this little gap midway down."

"An invincible suit, yet it has a hole in it!" Daretor said doubtfully.

"Not an invincible suit, but a suit that enhances the skills of the wearer. There must have been a warrior who pitted himself against too many skilled opponents, or perhaps he was shot at a distance by a crossbowman. Now, the link if you please?"

Daretor removed the link from his finger and gave it to Tannard, who nestled it into the coals of the forge and puffed the bellows until the metal glowed with the colour of the coals. Presently he removed it with a pair of tongs and placed it on an anvil. With one strike of his hammer and chisel the link was split. He returned it to the coals.

After several minutes it was glowing yellow. Tannard spread the chainmail so that the tear was over the anvil and the ragged links were lined up. He removed the link, beat the ends flat, and then returned it to the coals for the last time.

“All this for one link,” said Daretor. “The suit of mail must have been years in the making.”

“When you have a hundred or so links in the forge at once, the work goes faster. Still, it does take a lot of time.” He looked up and in the glow of the forge he looked menacing. Daretor tightened the grip on his sword. “Unless of course a master sorcerer had a hand in it.”

With a coarse laugh Tannard removed the link from the forge with his tongs and skilfully looped it into the weave of the chainmail. He delicately tapped the ends together, then quenched the hot link. The suit of mail was complete.

‘It’s stopped glowing!’ Daretor said, astonished.

“Very observant,” said Tannard as he dropped the mailshirt to the bench. “Now, there is one more thing you must do, my skilled and brave accomplice.”

“What’s that?” Daretor asked as he walked forward to claim the mailshirt.

“You must run for your life, or you can stay and be killed,” said Tannard as he pulled his sword from its scabbard in a leisurely motion. “It makes no difference to me.”

Daretor drew his own sword at once and lunged at Tannard, who parried competently. Daretor chopped backhand, but swung clumsily wide. The blades clanged and Tannard skipped back confidently, a cat with a mouse.

Daretor stumbled after him, then tried to bring his blade to the ready position. To his alarm he found that he had forgotten such a simple stance.

“Confused?” asked Tannard. “You should be, you fool. For all the time you were with me you never once asked how the skills got into the links in the chainmail.”

Daretor tried to attack now, but the sword felt as if he had picked it up for the first time, and his footwork was clumsy. Tannard stepped to one side and easily parried the downward chop of Daretor’s blade.

“All the time that you were wearing it, the link was soaking up the fighting skills that you used and storing them in its magical aura. You continued to possess your skills of a woodsman turned master swordsman because you wore the link, but once you took it off, you became a pathetic dolt who could not even fight off a blind beggar.”

Daretor lunged again, striking down wildly in the hope of knocking Tannard’s blade aside so that he could grab him with his free hand – his strength was unchanged, even if his skills with a sword was gone.

Tannard had seen this many times before. He skipped back, then dodged to the side. Daretor’s blade bit into the wooden bench, then snapped as he tried to pull it free. He swung the stub down just as Tannard lunged forward. His blade sliced Daretor just below the ribs, and he crashed down into the neatly stacked firewood beside the forge.

Daretor’s face froze in disbelief. He clutched at the wound, gasping in agony as Tannard stood over him and cleaned the blade.

“While wearing the mailshirt I’m the greatest warrior ever to walk the known world,” Tannard gloated. “Without the mailshirt I’m just a so-so swordsman, but I learned that swordwork in my own right.”

Daretor looked up from where blood seeped through his fingers. “The mailshirt ... should suck away your skills ... too?”

“No, my friend,” Tannard said, sheathing his sword. “By wearing an individual link you gain its skills while you wear it but lose both its skills and your own when you take it off. When the links are worn as part of the mailshirt, they confer skills only, they cannot take them away.”

Daretor’s eyes were almost closed now. He wheezed loudly, feigning a death rattle in his breath. He pitched backwards and was then still.

Tannard backed toward the bench, still watching Daretor, but he did not move. He did not notice that Daretor was still breathing slow and shallow breaths.

“I can hardly wait to try out your skills, Daretor,” Tannard said to himself as he held the mailshirt high. “Your swordwork lives on, even though you are dead. The skills of many hundreds of warriors are also still alive even though their creators perished long ago.”

He walked back among the sacks of wood and coal, then returned, dragging something across the straw-strewn floor. The blacksmith, Daretor realised.

“There shall be little enough of the pair of you to recognise after the fire, I fear. But it might even appear as though you squabbled over something, and killed one another.”

Taking out his dagger, he began to cut away at the thonging that sealed up the neck of the mailshirt. He put his arms into it, then stretched them above his head, and began hopping lightly on the spot to shake it down over his arms and torso.

Daretor watched him, his eyes open by only the merest slit. As soon as the mail was down over Tannard’s head, he drew his axe and flung it with all his remaining strength at Tannard’s chest. It buried itself in his sternum, almost up to the handle. Tannard teetered for an instant, incredulous, then toppled to the floor with a loud jingling of chainmail.

Daretor got to his knees, then shuffled across the floor, still clutching his own wound. Tannard was dead as he pulled the mailshirt away from his arms and head. In spite of the pain from his wound he began to shake the mailshirt onto himself. “Lucky that I never used an axe while wearing that accursed link,” he muttered to himself.

Strange, almost sensual feelings plucked at Daretor’s body as he lay against the bench wearing the mailshirt. He rubbed at his wound, and a memory stirred in the fabric of the mailshirt and became his own thought.

“Ah, someone was wise enough to have had a skilled physician wear one of these links for a time. A warrior needs the arts of healing far more than a man of peace.”

He found some common herbs and oils in the smithy’s kitchen and treated his wound with them as though he had decades of experience at healing. At last he sewed the wound with a horse needle and dried gut thread. Daretor lay back to rest without removing the mailshirt, and was very quickly asleep.

Hours later he awoke. He had a slight fever, but the wound was not seriously inflamed. More importantly, it was clear what he must do. Tannard was lying where he had fallen, the handaxe still buried in his chest. His body had become cold now, and his blood had congealed to dark gouts. The axe came away with a sucking sound, and he washed the blood from the blade in the quench pail. The body of the blacksmith had a knife in the back – Daretor’s knife, somehow retrieved from the thorn bushes by Tannard. Tannard obviously liked to leave a cold, blank trail, full of false but logical clues. He prudently checked Tannard’s purse and found within it eleven gold coins and some silver.

Daretor moved about painfully, collecting what he needed into his saddlebags, then he scraped the last of the live embers out of the ash in the hearth and dropped them into the straw packing. They smoked at first, then crackled up into flames.

The blacksmith's was well alight in the distance as Daretor heaved himself up onto his own horse. The second fire had added to the town's alarm, and the narrow streets were filled with people carrying pails and beaters. Daretor fought to keep his stallion down to a trot. The jouncing of the trot stabbed pain through his wound at every step, but he did not want to seem like a thief in a hurry to escape.

"Where's Tannard, my merchant friend?" he called as he rode. "My friend has vanished!"

Daretor had heeded Tannard's lesson on false trails. Or perhaps the mailshirt had more than its share of devious intent.

"Pox take your drunken friend, the town's afire!" shouted the tavern's huge landlord, suddenly appearing beside him and flinging a bundle of waterskins across his saddle. "Ride to the beach and fill these for the firefighters!"

Daretor rode for the beach ... and kept riding. The incoming tide washed the hoof prints from the sand as he passed, and by the time he stopped to rest, the town was no more than a glow on the horizon.

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Some weeks later Daretor rode out across the Chasmgyle Bridge, stopping at the midpoint. There was a torrent raging below, fed by melting snows higher in the mountains. Highlights from the ruddy sunset gleamed on the water as he turned stiffly and fished a bundle out of his left saddlebag. It was heavy with Tannard's hammer, tongs, chisels and files.

"I'll use the skills of the mailshirt," he said, looking down at the bundle. "I have no real choice until I learn to fight with a sword again. What I'll never do is steal the skills of another warrior to enhance its powers even further."

He heaved the bundle over the heavy log railing, noting with satisfaction that the pain just below his ribs was nearly gone. The bundle of tools dwindled into a speck, then hit the brown torrent with a splash that blended into the turbulent water within a moment. Daretor flicked the reins and his horse continued across the bridge.

Wear the links, and your skills were sponged from you as you used them. While you wore the mailshirt the skills of all those who had worn it before were transferred to you. Daretor's hand dropped to his axe, and he patted the head as if it were his only friend.

He rode from the bridge and into the shadow of a mountain – and suddenly reined the stallion in. The mailshirt was glowing with that strange, coppery light! There must be another link nearby – but that was impossible! He had examined the mailshirt, it was complete now, undamaged ... but wait. He felt for the double linking on the left shoulder. Seven rows of five, but on the right shoulder, six rows of five. Five more links were out there, five links carried by five warriors who wanted to be invincible. Five warriors who were almost certainly unfit to wear the mailshirt.

"Am I any better?" Daretor asked himself aloud as he laced up his sheepskin jacket to hide the glow. "Why be invincible? To gain wealth, to gain power."

A refugee family from the fighting at Passendof was ahead on the road. His first test. He took out the purse that he had looted from Tannard's body and tossed it to the ragged father as he passed.

"Buy a new life," he called cheerfully, then nudged his horse into a canter as they called incredulous thanks after him. A half-mile later the glow from the mailshirt died out.

Five links to go, and five deadly duels. No, six duels, the duel with temptations to wealth and power would be unceasing until he could get rid of the mailshirt. He could never do that, however, until it was complete and there were no more stray links to guide adventurers to where it was hidden. Only then could he drown it in some ocean chasm or pitch it into the mouth of a volcano and be sure that it would remain unfound.

When the last trace of sunset had faded from the sky he tethered his horse behind a rockfall and set up camp for the night. Very carefully he laid out a ground cloth, placed his saddle and saddlebags in a row, then took off the mailshirt and draped it over them. With his blanket tucked over the lot, it passed well as a body.

Daretor hid in a crevice with a good vantage, his fighting axe out.

An hour passed; he fought the temptation to doze – and suddenly his head cleared instantly. He grinned and began to flex his muscles. The mailshirt was glowing ruddy orange through the weave of the blanket ...

‘The Weakest Link’ was first published in *Dream Weavers*, edited by Paul Collins and published by Penguin Books Australia, 1996. The authors’ pseudonym was Roger Wilcox.

Comprehension and Interpretation

- What is a link, as featured in the story? What happens when you put one on? What happens when you take it off? When does it glow?
- What sort of a person is Tannard? Find some appropriate adjectives, and support your point of view with evidence from the story.
- Why does Daretor decide that he will eventually throw the mailshirt into an ocean chasm or down a volcano? What has to happen, however, before he will be able to do that, and why?
- How does the writer build suspense?
- Genre fiction has particular conventions, eg gothic horror has creaking houses, badly lit staircases and ghostly noises. What things about this story tell you that it is a fantasy? (Setting, language, quest.)
- Does *The Weakest Link* differ from chapters 4, 7 & 8 in *Dragonlinks*? If so, how?

Project

Using your imagination, as well as the details offered in this story, draw a map of the country referred to in *The Weakest Link*. Include the Dragonfrost plain, the Algon Mountain range, the harbour of D’loom, the Skelt Coast and Passendof. Give a historical flavour to your map by adding a legend, illustrations and graphic banners that refer to events in the story.

Vocabulary

enigmatic	mailshirt	gleeman	Fable	quaver	enchantment
quaffed	mulled	carousing	Tankard	blacksmith	scabbard
stygian	enhances	sorcerer	Jouncing	turbulent	daemon

- Use each of the above words in a sentence to illustrate its meaning.
- Write several paragraphs of a fantasy story of your own invention using as many of these words as you can.

Since its first publication in 2002, *Dragonlinks* has built up a fan base and received much critical acclaim, including a berth in the Australian Centre for Youth Literature's list of 150 most treasured Victorian books. This list was compiled as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations for the State Library of Victoria and *The Age* newspaper.

There are many imaginary creatures within the pages of *The Jelindel Chronicles*: Lycellian snake rats, the lepon, trolls, daemons, spirit globes, the mantid and colonies of dragons. Among the more despicable characters are lindraks and master Adepts, and bizarre creations such as the giga-ch'ats_twenty-foot tall 'chickens'. All these ingredients continue to enchant the minds of readers, both young and old. As we follow Jelindel's quest we meet her many friends: the street rat, Zimak, honour-bound Daretor, and powerful witches Madam Dione and Lady Forturian. We also encounter her enemies, which include the Preceptor and the Archmage Fa'red.

This teaching aid has been written to assist teachers and students in learning about Jelindel and her companions, Zimak and Daretor, and to gain an insight into the author's method of creating the realistic world of Q'zar. It includes a vocabulary chart project, comprehension and questions for group discussion. The questions relate to *Dragonlinks* only, although exploration of the entire quartet will be an enlightening experience for teachers and students who revel in the worlds of quest fantasy. This resource has been written in a user-friendly style to encourage those in literature circles and in classroom discussion. It is hoped that teachers will explore the possibility of classroom activities across a wide variety of curriculum areas.

Teachers and students are encouraged to consider additional topics and questions. Although the following notes relate to the first book in the series, *Dragonlinks*, teachers could also re-word the text to include the three other titles that make up the quartet: *Dragonfang*, *Dragonsight*, (and in 2006) *Wardragon*.

Dragonlinks is an ideal novel for students at middle to upper secondary levels. Although the lead protagonist is female, there is plenty here for male readers to appreciate as well. Jelindel's scurrilous and chivalrous companions, Zimak and Daretor, and the relentless pace throughout will sate even the most reluctant male reader's hunger for a good read.

Introduction

'This is the sort of book you wish really was a never ending story.' Isobelle Carmody.

Jelindel dek Mediesar leads a charmed life until lindrak assassins murder her family. Fleeing to the markets Jelindel dresses as a boy to avoid detection. Here she teams up with Zimak, a street-wise urchin, and Daretor, a warrior on a quest to destroy an alien artifact.

Jelindel does not sit securely in any world. From being a pampered but scholarly daughter of the nobility she is forced into hiding and becoming streetwise. By having skills from both worlds, she slowly achieves the most remarkable thing of all_she learns the basics of magic without a teacher.

This is a novel about discovery and power. When Jelindel goes into hiding in the D'loom marketplace, she dresses as a boy and works as a scribe. A love of books, a phenomenal

memory and the basics of several languages make the lonely teenager a powerful opponent when a strange and dangerous mailshirt falls into her hands. If one can imagine a teenage version of the *X-Files*' Scully let loose in the worlds of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, this might describe Jelindel's situation.

Murder, betrayal and deceit are just some of the hurdles the trio must face in order to find the missing links from a star-dwellers' mailshirt (called the Wardragon)—six powerful links, whose individual powers are nothing compared with that of the complete mailshirt.

At stake are the lost links of an ancient mailshirt, which grows more powerful in its magical properties as more links are found and restored to its fabric. After the warrior Daretor has his skills as a swordsman sponged away by one of the links, he swears to collect the lost links together with the mailshirt, then destroy them. Zimak, Jelindel's friend from the marketplace, has a very different agenda. Jelindel flees with them from D'loom in fear of her family's assassins.

Slowly the links accumulate as the trio tracks down those who wear them. In the process, Jelindel begins to learn some of the techniques of magic. It is a dangerous path, but in taking it she develops into someone resembling more a scientist than a magician.

Dragonlinks can be read as a fast-moving heroic adventure at one level, but it is also an important lesson in the value of having both a critical attitude and an open mind. It is set in a consistent and detailed world, with strict rules behind the magic at work there. Although self-contained, it is also the basis of a much larger story.

How the Quest Starts (pages 10 & 11)

Reculemoon was all but eclipsed as she took a leather-bound sheaf of star charts and a tiny flask of wormglow from her bag. As the last of the light faded from the sky the city itself seemed to become hushed as well; then the stars blazed out from the completely black sky.

The fantail of the bird of paradise was near the zenith, while Delotia the Huntress was half above the horizon, her hair like breaking waves of fine stars.

Jelindel had only a handful of seconds to marvel at the celestial masterpiece before a sharp yelp of alarm pierced the night's silence and made her sit bolt upright. She looked about for the source of the noise but the entire city was shrouded in the dark veil of the eclipse.

A dog? The dogs only bark for a good reason, she thought, as she glanced across to the tall house where two windows showed lights. Why only a single yelp? If they had caught a real intruder there would be barking and growling and the screams of someone being torn apart. It was quiet now, so whatever it was, it was not important.

Jelindel turned back to the sky, greedily sweeping her eyes over the glorious spectacle. This sight was worth any punishment, any discomfort, she thought; then her lips whispered dreamily: "This is true freedom and absolute beauty. I want this to last forever."

A shriek echoed out from the mansion, shattering the hushed darkness of the eclipse. It was a cry of complete terror, and from a woman's throat. Immediately clashing weapons began an irregular, discordant chime.

Jelindel stood up on the wooden shingles, realising that something terrible was happening but scarcely able to believe it. There were more screams, and cries of pain that

were cut short. The thief-bell began to ring, then the entire ground floor of the mansion burst into flames as if it had been soaked in lamp oil.

Idyll Turns to Panic

At the beginning of the book, Jelindel, a countess, has no magical powers. She has escaped a boring banquet, but one she had to attend. It is a familiar setting that many will have encountered in their lives: that of obligation/duty. Having shirked that responsibility, Jelindel achieves what she wants: a bird's eye view of an eclipse. It is her escape from her honour bound duties that has saved her life. She is on a roof top when her family and their guests are slaughtered by lindraks, notorious royal assassins.

Comprehension Questions

- Did the first chapter draw you into the book. If so, why? If not, why not?
- Write an outline of what occurs in the first chapter.
- Has Jelindel led a charmed life? What is her lineage/parentage?
- Is the novel written in first person, second person or third person, and in past or present tense?
- Who befriends Jelindel when she finds herself orphaned in the marketplace? How does she see herself making a living?
- Would it be easy for a girl of Jelindel's age to get around in the world of Q'zar? What obstacles would a young girl face in that era? Are there any different to those faced today by a girl of fourteen, if she were cast out of her home?
- Why is it that Daretor vows to destroy the mailshirt? Is he right in seeking its destruction?
- The Preceptor and Fa'red form an uneasy alliance. Why, if they are on uncertain terms, do they tolerate one another?
- Name the three moons of Q'zar.
- Jeme quotes an adage on page 10. What is it? Are there others in the book?
- How does Fa'red describe the enchanted mailshirt to the Preceptor? (p 16)
- By which sound do the lindraks communicate with one another? (p 26)
- Jelindel creates a male pseudonym for herself. What is it? Why does she need to conceal her identity? Give two reasons.
- Jelindel and Zimak make a pact. They will teach one another their specialty. Name Jelindel's and Zimak's special gifts. (42)
- Name Jelindel, Zimak and Daretor's first deadly foe. (47)
- Jelindel sometimes apologises to a god. Name him. (80) Name the other god mentioned in the book. (96)
- Jabez Thull comes close to killing Jelindel, Daretor and Zimak. Which method does he employ to kill them? (97-)
- How does Jabez meet his end? (106)

- Where does the mailshirt come from?

Writing

- Write a one page outline for this book.
- Write a 400 word review. Give a brief summary of the plot, list the main protagonists. Outline the trials and tribulations they endure had provide a critical evaluation of the story. State the age of the book's target audience and give it a rating out of 10.
- In the original manuscript, Jelindel wrote a journal. Would this have been handy to the reader? Would it have described her innermost thoughts, or should these be implicit in the reading of the book? Write three journal entries for Jelindel in the first person. Insert them at the end of any three chapters. Would they improve the book, in your opinion?
- Zimak adds humour to the novel. This is done by use of dialogue such as: '... you filthy swine, Brother Jaelin, and after all that talk about chastity and self-control, too.' (and) 'Good, I'm not in the mood for a fight,' grumbled Zimak. 'I've got saddle sores. It's hard to feel like a heroic warrior on a dangerous quest when you've got saddle sores.' Give three more examples of Zimak's black humour.
- Daretor gets used by Jabez Thull to retrieve the valuable mailshirt. Give an example of a time when you have been 'used' by someone.

Vocabulary

What do the words below mean? One is made up. Which is it?

Adept (19)	fissures (47)	cartographers (47)	yokels (50)	wharfjack (57)
militia (66)	sidereal (75)	disembodied (75)	miscreant (75)	artisan (84)

- Find words (either real or made up) from the novel that the author uses to give his fantasy setting an authentic feel. These words are not often found in contemporary usage (for example, dolt, armourer, paraplane etc).

Setting

- Does *Dragonlinks* remind you of any historical period in Earth's past? Is so, which period? Explain your answer.

Characters

- Create a written portrait of Jelindel, Daretor, and Zimak. Name at least three distinguishing traits each has. Explain how each of their attributes helps the others in the party.
- Name five of their foes.
- Jelindel, Daretor and Zimak are very dissimilar in terms of their personalities and character. Name at least one reason why each of the characters wants to be with their two companions.

- Which character do you like best? Explain your answer.
- Zimak has been hiding a secret from his companions. What is it?
- Does Jelindel make the best leader of the trio? If so, explain why. If not, put forward your own view of who would make the best leader and explain why.

Gender

- The lead protagonist is female. Are the male characters as well defined? Give reasons for your answer.
- There is little romance in *Dragonlinks*. Did the novel need some? Explain your answer.

Oral Activity

- Using an interview situation, a student becomes Jelindel. The interviewer must ask her to explain the events leading up to her presence at the D'loom marketplace. The interviewer might be a town constable, suspicious that Jelindel is a thieving street urchin. Remember that Jelindel cannot divulge who she is, for she fears the lindraks will kill her. Questions might include: 'Where do you come from?' 'How did you get here?' 'Where do you live?' Think of other questions to try trapping Jelindel.
- If you were in Jelindel's position, would you have followed her path, or would you have done something totally different? Tell the class what you would have done had you been in Jelindel's shoes that night her family was killed. Here, explain how else the author might have sent Jelindel on her quest.
- There are many themes in the book: quest, power, hate, love, revenge, honour, chivalry, retribution, forgiveness, ego. Discuss each of these themes pertaining to each of the three main characters. Does Zimak, for instance, know the meaning of chivalry?

Ending

- Some might think *Dragonlinks* concludes with some loose ends, and that if a sequel had not been produced, the book would have been unsatisfying. Were there any loose threads? If so, how would you tie them up?