

“The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”

Book Three

Against All Things Ending

Part V

“to achieve the ruin of the Earth”

Chapter One: The Burden of Too Much Time

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Chapter One: The Burden of Too Much Time

Thomas Covenant knelt on the rich grass of Andelain as though he had fallen there from the distance of eons. He was full of the heavens and time. He had spent uncounted millennia among the essential strictures of creation, participating in every manifestation of the Arch: he had been as inhuman as the stars, and as alone. He had seen everything, known everything—and had labored to preserve it. From the first dawn of the Earth to the ripening of Earthpower in the Land—from the deepest roots of mountains to the farthest constellations—he had witnessed and understood and served. Across the ages, he had wielded his singular self in defense of Law and life.

But now he could not contain such illimitable vistas. Linden had made him mortal again. His mere flesh and bone refused to hold his power and knowledge, his span of comprehension. With every beat of his forgotten heart, intimations of eternity were expelled. They oozed from his new skin like sweat, and were lost.

Still he held more than he could endure. The burden of too much time was as profound as orogeny: it subjected his ordinary mind to pressures akin to those which caused earthquakes; tectonic shifts. His compelled transubstantiation left him frangible. As the structure of what he had known and understood and thought and desired failed, moment after unaccustomed moment, the sentience that had sustained him across uncounted ages became riddled with fault-lines and potential slippage.

In some fashion which was not yet awareness or true sensation, he recognized that he was surrounded by needs; by people and spectres who had gathered to witness Linden’s choices. Dark against the benighted heavens, broad-boughed trees defined the hollow where he knelt among Andelain’s hills. But their shadows paled in the fervid gleaming of Loric’s *krill*, bright with wild magic—and in the ghostly luminescence of the four High Lords whose presence formed the boundaries of Covenant’s crisis, and of Linden Avery’s.

Towering and majestic, the Dead Lords stood timeless as sentinels at the points of the compass to observe, and perhaps to judge, the long consequences of their own lives. Berek and Damelon, Loric and Kevin: Covenant knew them—or had known them—as intimately as they knew themselves. He felt Berek’s empathy, Damelon’s concern, Loric’s chagrin, Kevin’s vehement repudiation. He comprehended their presence. They had been summoned by the same urgency which had brought him to this night, drawn and escorted by the Law-Breakers.

But when he regarded the spirits of the Lords—briefly, briefly, between one wrenching heartbeat and the next—he found that he was no longer one of them; one with them. Their thoughts had become as alien and immemorial as the speech of mountains.

Each throb of blood in his veins bereft him of himself.

Caer-Caveral and Elena he comprehended as well. They remained behind him on the slope of the hollow, Caer-Caveral wreathed in the austere self-sacrifice of his centuries as Andelain's Forestal, Elena heart-rent and grieving at the cost of the misplaced faith which had led her, unwilling, into the Despiser's service. The Law-Breakers might have had the stature of the High Lords—the grandeur and might of Berek and Damelon, the severe valor of Loric, the anguish of Kevin—but they had been diminished by their chosen deaths; their deliberate participation in the severances which had made possible Covenant's return to mortality. Now they had completed their purpose. They stood back, leaving Covenant to lose himself among his flaws.

Had he been able to do so, he might have acknowledged Infelice, not because he esteemed the self-absorbed surquedry of the *Elohim*, but because he understood the doom which Linden had wrought for them. Of the peoples of the Earth, the *Elohim* would be the first to suffer extermination. The havoc which would extinguish all of the world's glories would begin with them.

The Harrow he perceived in glimpses like the flickering of a far signal-fire. But he had already forgotten the warning that those glimpses should have conveyed. His human vision was blurred as if he were weeping, shedding tears of knowledge and power. Terrible futures hinged upon the Insequent, as they did upon Anele: Covenant saw that. Yet their import had dripped into the fissures of his dwindling mind, or had seeped away like blood.

The losses which Linden had forced him to bear surpassed his strength. They could not be endured. And still they grew, depriving him by increments of everything that death and purified wild magic and the Arch of Time had enabled. With every lived moment, fractures spread deeper into his soul.

The Worm of the World's End was coming. It was holocaust incarnate. He seemed to feel its hot breath on the nape of the Earth's neck.

The *Haruchai* he knew, and the Ranyhyn, and the Ramen, although their names had fled from him. Of the people who had once been the Bloodguard, and once his friends, he remembered only sorrow. In the name of their ancient pride and humiliation, they had made commitments with no possible outcome except bereavement. Now three of them had been maimed so that their right hands resembled his: the fourth had lost his left eye. Recognizing them, Covenant wanted to cry out against their intransigence. They should have obeyed the summons of their Dead ancestors.

But he did not. Instead he found solace in the company of the Ranyhyn and the Ramen—although he could not have explained in any mortal language why they comforted him. He knew only that they had never striven to reject the boundaries of themselves. And that the Ranyhyn had warned Linden as clearly as they could.

Like the Ramen, the horses appeared to study the *Haruchai* warily, as if the halfhand warriors posed a threat which Covenant could not recall.

The Stonedownor he identified more by the *orcrest* in his hand and the fate on his forehead than by his features or devotion. The young man had chosen his doom when he had first closed his fingers on the Sunstone. He could not alter his path now without ceasing to be who he was.

Everyone who had remained near Linden in this place, this transcendent violation, watched Covenant with shock or consternation or bitterness. However, he was not yet fully present among them. He was only conscious of them dimly, like figures standing at the fringes of a dream. His first frail instants of concrete awareness were focused on Linden.

The anguish on her face, loved and broken, held him. It kept him from losing his way among the cracks of his mind.

She stood defenseless a few paces in front of him. His ring and her Staff had fallen from her stricken fingers. In the silver glare of the *krill*, the traced stains on her jeans looked as black as accusations. The red flannel of her shirt was snagged and torn as though she had made her way to him through a wilderness of thorns. She seemed empty of resolve or hope, fundamentally beaten, as if he had betrayed her.

The sight of her, unconsoled and inconsolable, magnified the stresses which damaged him. But it also anchored him to his mortality. The fault of her plight was his. He had ignored too much of the Law which had bound and preserved him.

Moments or lifetimes ago, he had said, *Oh, Linden. What have you done?*—but not in horror. Rather she had filled him with awe. He had loved her across the entire span of the Arch of Time, and she had become capable of deciding the outcome of worlds.

Done, Timewarden? Infelice had answered. *She has roused the Worm of the World's End.* But he cared nothing for Infelice herself: only the fate of her people concerned him. — *every Elohim will be devoured.* Involuntarily he was remembering his own sins. They seemed more real than the people or beings around him.

Trust yourself, he had told Linden when he should not have spoken to her at all, not under any circumstance. He had said, *You need the Staff of Law*, and, *Do something they don't expect.* He had even addressed her friends through Anele, although their names and exigencies were lost among the cracks of his sentience. And he had pleaded with her to find him—

Defying every necessity that sustained the Earth and the Land, he had pointed her toward the ineffable catastrophe of his resurrection.

Still he could not grasp what Linden's companions were doing. He had not known an illucid instant since his passing; but now people were in motion for reasons which bewildered him.

Shouting, "Desecrator!" one of the *Haruchai* rushed to strike her. A single blow of his fist would crush her skull. But another *Haruchai*, the man who had lost an eye, opposed her attacker; flung him away in a flurry of strikes and counters.

The two remaining *Haruchai* also charged at Linden. One stumbled under an onslaught of Ramen. Aided by the Stonedownor, the three Ramen kept that *Haruchai* from his target. And his kinsman was impeded by Ranyhyn. A roan stallion kicked the man in the chest; sent him sprawling backward.

"Yes!" Kevin Landwaster shouted. "*Slay her! She merits death!*"

But Berek Halfhand's great voice answered, "*Hold! Restrain yourselves, Haruchai! Matters beyond your comprehension lie between the Timewarden and the Chosen. You have no part in them!*"

"This night is sacred," added Damelon Giantfriend more quietly. "Your strife is unseemly. Beings mightier than you would not contend here."

Elena may have been weeping. Caer-Caveral stood apart from her, distancing himself from her distress.

Perhaps out of respect for the Lords, or perhaps for some reason of their own, the *Haruchai* ceased their struggles.

Covenant made no sense of it. He could more easily have explained why the Wraiths had not intervened. The *Haruchai* were simply too human and necessary to invoke the forces which defended Andelain. Still he said nothing. There was no room in his crippled apprehension for

anything or anyone except Linden.

She was moving as well, as if she had been released by the quick violence of the *Haruchai*. Every line of her form was agony and protest as she strode toward him. Flagrant with pain, she seemed to rear over him as she raised her arm. When she struck him, he was too confused to duck his head or defend himself.

“God *damn* you!” she cried: a tortured wail. “Why didn’t you *say* something? You could have *told* me—!”

Covenant gaped in wonder at the forgotten sensation of physical hurt as Linden fell to her knees in front of him. She covered her face with her hands; but she could not stop the sobs bursting from the bottom of her heart. Nearly shouting, she wept as if she were being torn out of herself by the roots.

He recognized her torment. But it was the rich sting of her blow that brought him into focus at last. For the first time since his death in agony, and his transfiguration, he tasted the crisp balm of Andelain’s air, cooled and accentuated by the darkness that enclosed the Hills. It should have eased him, but it did not.

“Oh, Linden,” he gasped softly. Fearing that she would repudiate his touch, he tried to put his arms around her nonetheless. His movements were awkward with disuse; weak; almost numb. Yet he clasped her to his chest. “I shouldn’t have said anything at all. In your dreams. Through Anele. The risk was too great. But I was afraid you might lose hope. I couldn’t—” He swallowed implications of ruin. “Couldn’t just abandon you.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. This is my fault. I was too weak.”

He meant, I was too human. Even living in the Arch. I couldn’t watch you suffer and let you think you were alone.

I would spare you the cost of what you’ve done if I knew how.

“Anything *wrong*?” snapped Infelice. “You rave, Timewarden. Your transformation is an immitigable evil. It has undone you. Do you not see that she has wrought the destruction of the Earth?”

Anger and Earthpower glittered around the *Elohim* as if she wore garments of disillusioned gems. Even in her wrath, she should have been lovely to behold. But everything that Thomas Covenant still possessed was concentrated on Linden: her sob-wracked body in his arms; her hair against the side of his face. Immersed in her distress, he ignored Infelice.

Loric Vilesilencer did not. “Be still, *Elohim*,” he growled. “The fault of this—if it is fault—is yours as much as his or hers. You fear only for yourselves. You care nothing for the Earth. Yet there is much here that surpasses your self-regard.”

“No!” protested Kevin urgently. “The *Elohim* speaks sooth. Have I suffered damnation and learned naught? She has performed a Desecration which exceeds comprehension. The Humbled know it, if the Timewarden does not. The Chosen herself knows it.”

“Enough, Loric-son,” Berek said in a voice of commandment. “The fate of life belongs to those who know love and death. It is not our place to judge, or to condemn. And Time remains to us, as it does to the living. The making of worlds is not accomplished in an instant. It cannot be instantly undone. Much must transpire before the deeds of the Chosen bear their last fruit.”

Holding Linden’s knotted grief and horror, Covenant tried to grapple with all that he had lost. He needed to retain as much as he could; but a numbness like lethargy hampered him. When Kevin spoke of damnation and Desecration, the bedrock plates of Covenant’s mind shifted against each other. His concentration broke: he seemed to slip out of the present. He still held

Linden; still saw that the *Haruchai* were barely able to contain their desire to deliver death; still felt the troubled emotions of the Dead High Lords. The Ramen and the Ranyhyn, the Stonedownor and one *Haruchai*, remained poised to defend Linden. At the same time, however, he found himself remembering—

The Stonedownor had come to stand behind Linden; place his hands softly on her shoulders. “Ah, Linden.” His voice ached. “Do not weep so. I grasp little of what has occurred. But an august spirit has avowed that time remains to us. Can you not hear him? Surely the powers gathered here may accomplish much. And we have not yet attempted to redeem your son. In his name—“

The young man said more, but Covenant did not recognize it. He was remembering Kevin’s confrontation with Lord Foul in Kiril Threndor, Heart of Thunder. Pieces of his mind witnessed the first moments of the Ritual of Desecration as if they were superimposed on Linden and Andelain.

There Kevin’s despair was as vivid as the chiaroscuro glinting from Kiril Threndor’s myriad-faceted stone: his self-loathing; his desire to punish himself. His ravaged love and failure exalted the carious illumination of Lord Foul’s malice. If Covenant had been truly present in the chamber, he would have tried to stop Kevin. He would have had no choice: his own spirit would have been torn by the fangs of Lord Foul’s eyes, clawed by the ragged nails of Kevin’s desperation.

But he could not stay to watch the Ritual enacted. He had seen it before, and was unable to control the images which slid along the fault-lines within him. One thing led to another in the wrong direction. Instead of witnessing the culmination of Kevin’s self-betrayal, he followed Lord Foul backward in time.

While Linden struggled to master herself in his embrace, and the Stonedownor attempted to soothe or rally her, Covenant visited the Despiser’s brief decades masquerading among the Lords of the Council, accepted as a-Jeroth because none of the Lords could name their reasons for being reluctant to trust him. From there, Covenant’s recollections involuntarily retreated to the many centuries when Lord Foul had inhabited the Lower Land, unknown to the Council, or to any of the peoples who preceded the Lords; unrecognized by anyone except the Forestals who preserved the truncated awareness of the One Forest. During that long age, the Despiser was hampered by the Colossus of the Fall, and by the fierce strength of the Forestals. Therefore he had hidden himself even from the Ravers, until the first waning of the Interdict freed them to do his bidding. Instead he bred other servants among the twisted denizens of Sarangrave Flat and the Great Swamp, and built Foul’s Creche, and spawned his armies, and readied his powers—and quested unceasingly for the most useful of the banes buried deep under Mount Thunder.

But before that—

Covenant could not stop himself, even though Linden’s wretchedness wrung his heart, and her companions waited as if they expected him to offer some salvific revelation.

Before that, the Despiser considered the Insequent, rejecting them because their theurgies were too dissociated to serve him. In regions of the Earth so distant that even the Giants had never visited them, he submerged himself among the Demimages of Vidik Amar, who wielded a contingent magic; but he found that when he had corrupted them to his purpose, they turned against each other, diminishing themselves in the name of Despite. Earlier, he nurtured his resentment among the eager energies of the Soulbiter, although they could not accomplish his purpose. Earlier still, he spent an age of failure with the cunning folk who would one day give birth to Kasreyn of the Gyre. And before that, he essayed an approach to the Worm of the

World's End. But the Worm was not of his making. He could not rouse it directly: he could only disturb its slumber by damaging the One Tree. And the Guardian of the One Tree was proof against him.

Covenant remembered the sources of the Despiser's frustration, the roots of his accumulating, minatory fury. He recognized the Despiser's own secret despair, concealed even from himself, and enacted on the beings around him instead.

Roughly Linden pushed herself back from Covenant. He could not stop her, or try to understand her: he only saw and felt her through the veils of Lord Foul's past. Her face was a smear of tears, and her chest shook with the effort of stifling her sobs. Her torment was as acute as Kevin's, and as punitive. But her straits were more cruel than his. She had committed her Desecration—and she had survived it.

Clenching herself against spasms of renewed weeping, she fought to speak.

"All you had to do. *All* you had to do. Was tell me. How to find Jeremiah." For a moment, she knotted her fists, beat them against her face. "Then I wouldn't—"

Her features twisted as if she were about to howl.

The *Haruchai* with one eye had moved to stand beside her. "He could not, Chosen," he said flatly. "His silence was required. I endeavored to forewarn you. But you were unable to heed me. You do not forgive, and cannot harken to other counsel."

Like Covenant, Linden did not appear to hear him.

But Covenant remembered.

Spectres which may not be denied—

—will come to affirm the necessity of freedom.

Nevertheless the *Haruchai*'s words were too recent: they could not break the grip of Lord Foul's striving across hundreds or thousands of centuries.

Still Linden needed Covenant: some part of him felt that. She needed something from him that he could not give while he remained trapped among the fragments of the past. In spite of his own pain and bewilderment, he could not willingly ignore her.

Nor could he contain the pressure of remembrance which severed him from himself.

"Hit me," he panted thinly. His voice was so frayed and raw that he hardly heard it. "Hit me again."

A fire that might have been shock or shame or rage burned away Linden's tears; but she did not hesitate. Flinging her whole hurt into the blow, she struck his cheek as hard as she could.

Physical pain. The shock and sting of abused skin. The harsh jerk of his neck as his head snapped back. Air which should have healed him in his lungs.

He saw her clearly again, as if she had slapped away his confusion.

"I'm sorry," he said: the best answer he had. "I'm too full of time. I can't hold onto it. But pieces—"

Her open anguish stopped him. He was not saying what she needed to hear. The Stonedownor—Liand, his name was Liand—tried to comfort her, but his words and his gentle hands did not touch her distress. The *Haruchai* was called Stave. His single eye considered Covenant with ungiving severity.

Linden had been brought to this place—to the Dead, and to Loric's *krill*, and to the devastation of the world—by forces as great in their own way as the pressures which fractured Covenant.

"I couldn't tell you then," he said; groaned. "I couldn't say anything. None of us could." He meant the Dead around him. "The necessity of freedom— It's absolute. You have to make

your own choices. Everything hinges on that. If I told you where to find your son—or warned you what might happen if you used the *krill* the way you did—I would have changed your decisions. I would have changed the nature of what you had to choose.”

The nature of the risks that she had to take.

“That’s what Lord Foul does. He changes your choices. He wasn’t trying to stop you when you were attacked on your way here. His allies fought you because he wanted to make you more determined. So you would think you were doing the right thing.”

“His servants have their own desires,” Infelice told Linden. Her tone was acid, gemmed in gall. “Some among them do not believe that they serve him. In folly, they imagine that their aspirations exceed his, or that they act in their own names. But they cannot conceive the height and breadth of his intent. Like yours, all of their deeds conduce to his ends.

“Did we not caution you to beware the halfhand? Did we not speak to the peoples of the Land, seeking to ensure that you were forewarned?”

“Enough, *Elohim*,” Berek’s shade demanded. “Your plight is not forgotten. Permit the Timewarden to speak while he remains able to do so.”

Covenant ignored Infelice; ignored Berek. “I couldn’t treat you that way,” he went on, imploring Linden to understand him. “No matter what happened. I couldn’t tamper with anything you decided to do. I’ve already taken too many chances. If you need to blame someone, blame me.

“But if the Earth has any hope—any hope at all—it depends on you. It has ever since Joan brought you here. And it still does. Freedom isn’t just a condition for using wild magic. It’s a condition for *life*. Without it, everything eventually turns into Despite.”

Abruptly Linden pushed herself to her feet; distanced herself from him. He saw a fresh storm of tears gather in her, but she closed herself against it. “*No*.” Her protest was a rough scrape of sound, bloody and betrayed. “That isn’t right. It doesn’t work that way. *You’re* the one who saves the world. I just want to save my son.”

He ached for her through the clamor of his own dismay: the heavy labor of his pulse, needless for millennia; the gasp of air in his lungs; the burning of his face where she had struck him; the excruciation of Time as it bled away. She had every reason to feel betrayed. She had believed that he loved her—

He did love her. He had loved her during every instant that the Arch had ever contained. If he had not loved her, he would never have found the strength to sacrifice himself against the Despiser. But for that very reason, he shied away from the sight of her outrage and grief. Slipping again, he fell like debris into fissured memories where his mind and his volition could be ground to powder.

For reasons that eluded him, he found himself regarding the ornately-clad figure of the Harrow.

The Insequent still sat his destrier as though he had no part to play in what transpired around him. But the deep voids of his eyes were fixed hungrily on the ring and the Staff that Linden had dropped as if in abandonment.

The Harrow had known the Vizard. Of course he had. And the Vizard had possessed knowledge which the Harrow lacked. Inspired by some leap of imagination, or by his own assiduous study, the Vizard had grasped the almost mystical significance, the potential use, of Jeremiah’s talent for constructs. And he had craved that resource for himself. He had seen in it the possibility that he might one day hold sway over the entire race of the *Elohim*. By that means, he would show himself greater than any of his people.

But he had made a damning mistake: he had tried to eliminate the implied threat of the Harrow. By their very nature, the Harrow's intentions would obliquely thwart the Vizard's. If the Harrow attained his goal, Jeremiah would be freed from Lord Foul's possession—and then Jeremiah would surely pass beyond the Vizard's reach. Therefore the Vizard had violated the most vital of the restrictions which the Insequent imposed upon themselves. Goaded by the scale of his own ambitions, he had opposed the Harrow's private designs. Thus the Vizard was lost to mind and name and life. The combined will of every Insequent had imposed his destruction. From Covenant's former place among the uncounted instants of the Arch, he had watched the Vizard fail and die.

It was the same fate that the Mahdoubt had suffered—

On some other level of his attention, Covenant understood that the Harrow would not attempt to snatch up the ring and the Staff: not while Infelice stood ready to resist him, and the Wraiths would come to preclude their conflict. But such concerns would not hinder the Harrow much longer.

Abruptly Stave stepped forward and slapped Covenant in Linden's stead. The *Haruchai* measured his blow precisely: it was not as hard as Linden's, although he could have snapped Covenant's neck with ease. But it was enough.

Renewed pain restored Covenant to the present.

At once, two of the other *Haruchai* sprang at Stave. They dragged him away roughly, ignoring the fact that he did not resist them. When the Ramen rushed to his aid—even the Manethrall whose lost eyes were bandaged—Stave stopped them with a word.

Facing the aggravated injury of Linden's gaze, Covenant tried again to answer her.

"I know. You've already changed the fate of the Earth, but you still don't believe you can do things like that. You just want to find your son.

"I can't tell you. I have no idea where he is. I used to know. But it's gone. It's just gone." He had already been reduced to a husk of his former self. With every breath, every heartbeat, the sum of his memories shrank. He imagined that he had once labored to protect Jeremiah's spirit from Lord Foul's taint. Yet he could no longer recall his efforts. "Everything I remember is broken. And I'm losing more all the time. There isn't enough of me to hold it."

He retained only the fragments that lay hidden among the cracks in his awareness. When he slipped into them, his mind lost its connection to his new flesh.

"Linden?" Liand asked softly, pleading with her. "What can be done? What remains to us? We cannot continue to strike him. If he is indeed unable to recollect—"

"No." Linden shook her head urgently; frantically. "No." She took a step backward. The avid brilliance of the *krill* limned her form, left her features in darkness. "This is wrong. It can't be this way.

"What did you want me to do? When you urged me to find you? What did you think I could accomplish?"

—hold it, Covenant thought. Holed them all. For a moment, the sight of Giantships tugged at him, pulling him down. He saw the wooden vessels of the Unhomed sunk by *turiya* Kinslaughterer while the Giants waited for death in their homes. The suction as the ships foundered tried to drag Covenant with them. None of them were left at sea: they had returned to The Grieve to be fitted with Gildenlode keels and rudders so that they might be able to find their way Home; end their long bereavement—

But Covenant struggled to remain present for Linden's sake.

Fumbling, unsure of his movements, he forced himself to stand and face her. "It isn't up

to me.” He was hardly able to feel his hands and feet. “I just didn’t want—“ His fingers twitched involuntarily, as if he were reaching for something. But he was unaware of them. They were as useless as the knowledge which had bled out of him. “That old man. The beggar. The Creator. He abandoned you before you ever came here. I didn’t want you to think I’d abandoned you too.”

“The Timewarden is diminished,” Infelice told Linden. Her voice sounded raw, almost flayed. “Before he became less than he was, he conceived that you might discover some less fatal means to span the gulf between the living and the Dead. He dreamed that you might earn or coerce his vast awareness from him without dooming this Creation.”

You would not be driven by mistaken love to bring about the end of all things!

Infelice may have been right. Or not. Covenant had lost those memories as well.

A short distance beyond the *krill*, two of the *Haruchai*—the Humbled—had released Stave. Covenant almost knew their names. Striding ahead of Stave, they joined their hand-maimed comrade among the Ramen and the Ranyhyn. But it was Stave who announced, “Then the burden falls to you, *Elohim*. Your knowledge is also vast. Where is the Chosen’s son? How may Corruption and his servants be opposed? How may the Worm be returned to slumber?”

Adrift in his dismembered mind, Covenant finally identified Mahrtiir: the Manethrall. The man had been terribly wounded in the battle of First Woodhelven. And the girl and the man with him were— They were— Covenant clung to Linden’s face with his grieving gaze. The Ramen with the Manethrall were his Cords. Pahnri and Bhapa.

“Have I not spoken of this?” retorted Infelice. “Like the Wildwielder herself, her son—and the Timewarden’s also, as well as his mate—are a shadow upon our hearts. Her son has been hidden from us. And the Worm cannot be returned to slumber. By the measure of mountains, it is a small thing, no more than a range of hills. An earthquake might swallow it. Yet its power surpasses comprehension. No upheaval or convulsion will hinder it. Against any obstruction, it will feed and grow mighty until it consumes the essence of the Earth. Then all life and Time will cease. Naught remains for us except extinction.”

“All the more reason for vengeance,” growled Kevin’s shade. “Her crimes must be answered, as mine have been. The Humbled serve the Land falsely if they continue to permit her life.”

Elena moaned as though she shared the Landwaster’s ire—and loathed herself for doing so. Caer-Caveral regarded her with a bitter scowl, but said nothing.

“Have done, son of Loric,” High Lord Berek ordered. “I will not caution you again. Your crimes have not yet been truly answered. Your fathers will speak of you ere this night is done. Until you have heard what is in our hearts, you will withhold your denunciations of the Chosen.”

The Humbled appeared to heed Kevin rather than Berek. They bowed to the last of the Lord-Fatherer’s line as if to acknowledge his despair; to honor his counsel. But they did not strike at Linden again. Instead they arrayed themselves between Covenant and the bedizened form of Infelice.

One of them said, “We require certainty, *Elohim*.” Galt, that was his name. Beneath its inflectionless surface, his voice thrummed with intensity. “Do you avow that it is indeed Thomas Covenant, ur-Lord and Unbeliever, white gold wielder, who now stands before us, returned from death to flesh and life?”

Covenant’s eyes felt as untrustworthy as his hands. Cold or numbness blurred his sight in spite of Andelain’s clarity. Nevertheless he saw that the emotions and pressures of the beings

around Linden did not console her. They could not. She hardly seemed to hear Kevin's acid recrimination, or Infelice's. Berek's oblique defense did not touch her.

"Self-doubt?" asked the Harrow, mocking the *Haruchai*. "You also have become less than you were. The truth must surely be plain to all who have witnessed the lady's theurgy. Naught but the Timewarden's absolute resurrection could so pierce the self-absorption of the *Elohim*."

The Humbled ignored the Insequent. As one, Galt and Branl and—Covenant clutched at the name—and Clyme turned to face the result of Linden's terrifying gamble.

Galt seemed to speak for every *Haruchai* except Stave as he said, "Then command us, Unbeliever, Timewarden. Reveal what must be done. We know the treachery of your false son, and the madness of the Chosen. We will serve you with our last strength."

Covenant tried to focus on Galt. But the *krill* plucked at his attention, luring him with images which had once been as familiar as Time. In shards and slivers, flaws, he caught glimpses of Loric's prolonged, arduous search for a stone which could be shaped into the gem that formed the nexus of the dagger: a search which had taken him deep under *Melenkurion* Skyweir, following the Black River inward from Garroting Deep until he found a fragment of crystal made perfect by eons of contact with the Blood of the Earth. Like peering through cracked glass, Covenant saw Loric forge the metal of the *krill*, striving to emulate white gold. He lacked the raw materials to fashion white gold itself. But from his inherited and acquired lore, he had gleaned a comprehension of alloys: he worked with ores that could be transmuted and commingled until they became strong enough to sustain the pristine possibilities of the gem. If Covenant allowed himself to drift, he would be able to watch as though he stood at Loric's side while the dour High Lord sweated over his incantations and fires—

But Linden needed something from Covenant, something that his lost memories could not supply. And he had already failed her too often. If he slipped away now, he might break the promise implied by speaking to her when he should have remained silent. *Trust yourself. Do something they don't expect.* Broken as he was, he could still see that she hung on the brink, the outermost edge, of Kevin's despair. Her sense of abandonment, of betrayal, might topple her. Any nudge—Infelice's flagrant terror and scorn, the Harrow's machinations, Kevin's condemnation, the repudiation of the Humbled—might send her plunging into an abyss from which she could not be retrieved.

Desperately Covenant clung to the present. Wavering on his feet, he struggled to meet the demand of the Humbled. He could not distinguish it from Linden's need.

"What will you do?" he countered. "If I don't command you? If I refuse to respect what you've done to yourselves?"

Fingers had been severed from their right hands in his name; but he did not want that honor.

Branl's eyes widened. Clyme almost appeared to wince. But Galt did not hesitate.

"Then I will ride to Revelstone," he announced inflexibly, "that I may warn the Masters of the Chosen's Desecration. Clyme and Branl will remain with her to prevent further evil. Your ring will be returned to you. If you do not claim the Staff of Law, it will be conveyed to Revelstone, where it may be preserved for the Land's last defense."

Liand opened his mouth to protest. Mahrtiir's glower promised defiance. The Ranyhyn tossed their heads restively. But Linden did not appear to hear the Humbled. She stared at Covenant as though he filled her with horror that had no end.

"Then listen," Covenant told Galt with as much force as he could find in his riven spirit.

“And pay attention. I can only say this once.

“The Wraiths allowed her. They preserve Andelain, and they *allowed* her. Hellfire, doesn’t that *mean* anything to you?”

Shedding memories like pieces of his soul, he met Linden’s appalled stare.

“Linden.” Nearly undone by weakness and rue—by the numbness in his fingers and the frailty of his mind—he strained to make himself heard. “I’ve said it before. I know this is hard. I know you think you’ve come to the end of what you can do. But you aren’t done. And I trust you. Do you hear me? I *believe* in you. I’ll do everything I can to help. If there’s anything left—“

Linden flinched as though he had promised her the opposite of his intent. On her face, new hurts twisted against older shocks and chagrin. “Can you see it?” she asked Liand or Mahrtiir or Stave. Her voice throbbed like internal bleeding, as if she spoke with her heart’s blood. “He’s right. He can’t hold on. Something inside him is collapsing. I brought him back, but I didn’t do it right. He isn’t whole.

“And he has leprosy.”

To that, Covenant had no answer.

Already falling, he turned back to the Humbled.

“As for you. I command—“ His voice frayed and failed: he could not command anyone. But because he loved Linden, he managed to find a few more words. They felt like the last words in the world. “She’s more important than I am. If you have to choose, choose her. She’s the only one who can do this.”

He wanted to say more, but his wounds were too much for his mortal flesh. Within him, one age of the Earth bled into another, and he toppled to the grass as if he had been felled.

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