

“The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”

Book Two

Fatal Revenant

Part I

“lest you prove unable to serve me”

Chapter One: Reunion

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Chapter One: Reunion

In sunshine as vivid as revelation, Linden Avery knelt on the stone of a low-walled coign like a balcony high in the outward face of Revelstone’s watchtower.

Implacable as the Masters, Stave of the *Haruchai* stood beside her: he had led her here in spite of the violence with which his kinsmen had spurned him. And at the wall, the young Stonedownor, Liand, stared his surprised concern and incomprehension down at the riders fleeing before the on-rush of the Demondim. Like Stave, if by design rather than by blows, he had abandoned his entire life for Linden’s sake; but unlike the former Master, he could not guess who rode with the *Haruchai* far below him. He could only gaze urgently at the struggling horses, and at the leashed seethe of theurgy among the monsters, and gape questions for which he seemed to have no words or no voice.

At that moment, however, neither Liand nor Stave impinged on Linden’s awareness. They were not real to her.

Near Liand, Manethrall Mahrthir studied the exhausted mounts with Ramen concentration while his devoted Cords, Bhapa and Pahn, protected mad, blind Anele from the danger of a fall that he could not see.

With Linden, they had crossed hundreds of leagues--and many hundreds of years--to come to this place at this time. In her name, they had defied the repudiation of the Masters who ruled over the Land.

But none of her companions existed for her.

To the north lay the new fields which would feed Revelstone’s inhabitants. To the south, the foothills of the Keep’s promontory tumbled toward the White River. And from the southeast came clamoring the mass of the Demondim, vicious as a host of doom. The monsters appeared to melt and solidify from place to place as they pursued their prey: four horses at the limits of their strength, bearing six riders.

Six riders. But four of them were Masters; and for Linden, they also did not exist. She saw only the others.

In the instant that she recognized Thomas Covenant and Jeremiah, the meaning of her entire life changed. Everything that she had known and understood and assumed was altered, rendering empty or unnecessary or foolish her original flight from the Masters, her time among the Ramen, her participation in the horserite of the Ranyhyn. Even her precipitous venture into the Land’s past in order to retrieve her Staff of Law no longer held any significance.

Thomas Covenant was alive: the only man whom she had ever loved.

Her son was free. Somehow he had eluded Lord Foul’s cruel grasp.

And Jeremiah's mind had been restored. His eager encouragement of the Masters and their mounts as they struggled to outrun the horde showed clearly that he had found his way out of his mental prison; or had been rescued--

Transfixed, she stared at them past the wall of her vantage point, leaping toward them with her gaze and her health-sense and her starved soul. Moments ago, she had seen only the ruinous advance of the Demondim. But now she was on her knees, struck down by the miraculous sight of her adopted son and her dead lover rushing toward Revelstone for their lives.

Already her arms ached to hold them.

For two or three heartbeats, surely no more than that, she remained kneeling while Liand tried to find his voice, and Stave said nothing, and Mahrtiir murmured tensely to his Cords. Then she snatched up the Staff and surged to her feet. Mute and compelled, she flung herself back into the watchtower, intending to make her way down to the open gates; to greet Jeremiah and Covenant with her embrace and her straining heart.

But the chambers within the tower were crowded with tall mounds of firewood and tubs of oil. At first, she could not locate a stairway. And when she discovered the descent, the Masters refused to let her pass. One of them stood on the stair to forbid her.

"We prepare for battle," he informed her curtly. His people had already refused her claims on them. "You will be endangered here."

He did not add, And you will impede our efforts. Nor did she pause to heed him, or to contest the stair. *Linden, find me.* Her need for haste was too great. In all of her years with her son, she had never seen him react to people and events around him; had never seen an expression of any kind on his slack features. Riding toward Revelstone, however, his face shone with excitement as he waved his arms, urging his companions forward.

She wheeled away from the stair; ran for the suspended wooden bridge which linked the tower to the battlements of Revelstone.

Stave came to guide her. He had not wiped the blood from his mouth and chin. Dark stains marked his tunic. But his hurts did not slow him. And Mahrtiir accompanied him, with Bhapa, Pahni, and Liand grouped around Anele at his back.

They were her friends, but she hardly noticed them.

Fearless with urgency, she followed Stave and Mahrtiir across the unsteady span above the courtyard between the watchtower and Revelstone's inner gates. Gripping the Staff hard in one hand, she pursued her guides into the sudden gloom of the Keep's lightless passages.

She did not know the way. She had spent too little time here to learn even a few of Revelstone's complex intersections and halls. And she required illumination. If she had been willing to move more slowly, using only her enhanced senses, she could have trailed Stave's hard shape and Mahrtiir's more legible tension through the wrought gutrock. But she had to *hurry*. Instinctively, irrationally, she felt that her own rush to meet them might enable Jeremiah and Covenant to reach the comparative safety of the massive interlocking gates, the friable sanctuary of the Masters. As the reflected sunshine behind her faded, and the darkness ahead deepened, she called up a gush of flame from one iron heel of the Staff. That warm light, as soft and clean as cornflowers, allowed her to press Stave and the Manethrall to quicken their pace.

Nearly running, they descended stairways apparently at random, some broad and straight enough to accommodate throngs, others narrow spirals delving downward. Her need for haste was a fever. Surely she could reach the cavernous hall within the gates ahead of Jeremiah and Covenant and their small band of Masters?

Her friends followed close behind her. Anele was old; but his intimacy with stone, and

his decades among the mountains, made him sure-footed: he did not slow Liand and the Cords. And after them came the three Humbled, Galt, Clyme, and Branl, maimed icons of the Masters' commitments. They were as stubborn and unreadable as Stave; but Linden did not doubt that they intended to protect her--or to protect against her. The Masters had rejected Stave because he had declared himself her ally; her friend. Naturally they would not now trust him to fill any of their self-assigned roles.

Fervidly she tried to cast her health-sense farther, striving to penetrate Revelstone's ancient rock so that she might catch some impression of the Vile-spawn. How near had they come? Had they overtaken Covenant and Jeremiah? But she could not concentrate while she dashed and twisted down the passages. She could only chase after Stave and Mahrtiir, and fear that her loved ones had already fallen beneath the breaking tsunami of the Demondim.

But they had not, she insisted to herself. They had *not*. The Demondim had withdrawn their siege the previous day for a reason. Possessed by some fierce and fiery being, Anele had confronted the Vile-spawn; and they had responded by allowing Linden and those with her to escape--and then by appearing to abandon their purpose against Lord's Keep. Why had they acted thus, if not so that Jeremiah and Covenant might reach her? If they desired Jeremiah's death, and Covenant's, they could have simply awaited their prey in front of Revelstone's gates.

Jeremiah and Covenant were not being hunted: they were being *herded*.

Why the Demondim--and Anele's possessor--might wish her loved ones to reach her alive, she could not imagine. But she strove to believe that Covenant and Jeremiah would not fall. The alternatives were too terrible to be endured.

Then Linden saw a different light ahead of her: it spilled from the courtyard into the Keep. A moment later, Stave and Mahrtiir led her down the last stairs to the huge forehall. Now she did not need the Staff's flame; but she kept it burning nonetheless. She might require its power in other ways.

The time-burnished stone echoed her boot heels as she ran into the broad hall and cast her gaze past the gates toward the courtyard and the passage under the watchtower.

Beyond the sunshine in the courtyard, the shrouded gloom and angle of the wide tunnel obscured her line of sight. She felt rather than saw the open outer gates, the slope beyond them. With her health-sense, she descried as if they were framed in stone the four Masters astride their laboring horses. Covenant clung to the back of one of the *Haruchai*. Jeremiah balanced precariously behind another.

The mustang that bore her son was limping badly: it could not keep pace with the other beasts. And Covenant's mount staggered on the verge of foundering. All of the horses were exhausted. Even at this distance, Linden sensed that only their terror kept them up and running. Yet somehow they remained ahead of the swarming Demondim. If the monsters did not strike out with the might of the Illearth Stone, the riders would reach the outer gates well before their pursuers.

The fact that the Vile-spawn had not already made use of the Stone seemed to confirm Linden's clenched belief that Jeremiah and Covenant were being herded rather than hunted.

She wanted to cry out her own encouragement and desperation; wanted to demand why the Masters had not organized a sally to defend her loved ones; wanted to oppose the horde with Law and Earthpower in spite of the distance. But she bit down on her lip to silence her panic. Jeremiah and Covenant would not hear her. The *Haruchai* could not combat the Demondim effectively. And she did not trust herself to wield power when the people whom she yearned to save were between her and the horde.

Grimly she forced herself to wait, holding her fire over her head like a beacon, nearly a stone's throw from the courtyard so that the Keep's defenders would have room in which to fight if the monsters could not be prevented from passing the gates.

Abruptly the Masters and their horses surged between the outer gates into the dark tunnel. Hooves clanged on the worn stone as first Covenant and then Jeremiah fell into shadow. A heartbeat later, ponderous as leviathans, the outer gates began to close.

The heavy stone seemed to move slowly, far too slowly to close out the rapacity of the monsters. Through her fear, however, Linden realized that the Demondim had once again slackened their pace, allowing their foes to escape. She felt the impact as the gates thudded together, shutting out the Vile-spawn; plunging the tunnel into stark blackness.

Then the riders reached daylight in the courtyard, and she saw that all six of them were safe. She did not know how far they had fled the Demondim; but she recognized at once that none of them had suffered any harm.

The mounts had not fared so well. Like their riders, the horses were uninjured. But their terror had driven them to extremes which might yet kill them: they had galloped hard and long enough to break their hearts. Yet they did not stop until they had crossed the courtyard and passed between the inner gates. Then, as those gates also began to close, shutting out the last daylight, Jeremiah's mount stumbled to its knees; fell gasping on its side with froth and blood on its muzzle. Jeremiah would have plunged to the stone, but the Master with him caught him and lifted him aside. The horse bearing Covenant endured only a moment longer before it, too, collapsed. But Covenant and his fellow rider were able to leap clear.

When the inner gates met and sealed like the doors of a tomb, the flame of the Staff was the only light that remained in the forehall.

The Ramen protested at the condition of the horses; but Linden ignored them. She had already begun to rush forward, avid to clasp her loved ones, when Covenant yelled as if in rage, "Hellfire, Linden! *Put that damn thing out!*"

She stopped, gasping as though his vehemence had snatched the air from her lungs. Her power fell from her, and instant darkness burst over her head like a thunderclap.

Oh, God--

Just be wary of me. Remember that I'm dead.

If she could have found her voice, or drawn sufficient breath, she might have cried out at the Despiser, *You bastard! What have you done?*

A hand closed on her arm. She hardly heard Stave as he urged her softly, "A moment, Chosen. Handir and others approach, bearing torches among them. You need only constrain yourself for a moment."

He could still hear the mental speech of the Masters, although they now refused to address or answer him in that fashion.

At once, she rounded on Stave. Behind him, Liand and the Ramen were whispering, perhaps asking her questions, but she had no attention to spare for them. Gripping Stave as he gripped her, she demanded, "Your senses are better than mine." Like their preternatural strength, the vision of the *Haruchai* had always exceeded hers. "Can you *see* them?" See *into* them? "Are they all right?"

In the absence of the Staff's flame, she knew only blackness and consternation.

"They appear whole," the former Master answered quietly. "The ur-Lord has ever been closed to the *Haruchai*. Even the Bloodguard could not discern his heart. And his companion"--Stave paused as if to confirm his perceptions--"is likewise hidden."

“You can’t see *anything*?” insisted Linden. Even Kevin’s Dirt could not blind the Masters--

Stave may have shrugged. “I perceive his presence, and that of his companion. Nothing more.

“Chosen,” he asked almost immediately, “is the ur-Lord’s companion known to you?”

Linden could not answer. She had no room for any questions but her own. Instead she started to say, Take me to them. She needed to be led. Covenant’s shout had shattered her concentration: she might as well have been blind.

But then the torches that Stave had promised appeared. Their unsteady light wavered toward her from the same passage which had admitted her and her companions to the forehall.

A few heartbeats later, the Voice of the Masters, Handir, entered the hall. A coterie of *Haruchai* accompanied him, some bearing fiery brands. As they moved out into the dark, the ruddy light of the flames spread along the stone toward the gates. It seemed to congeal like blood in the vast gloom.

Now Linden could see the faces of her companions, confused by erratic shadows. None of them had the knowledge or experience to recognize Covenant and Jeremiah. Perhaps as a reproach to Linden, Handir had called the newcomers “strangers”. Nevertheless Mahrtiir and his Cords may have been able to guess at Covenant’s identity. The Ramen had preserved ancient tales of the first Ringthane. But Liand had only his open bafflement to offer Linden’s quick glance.

Apparently none of the Masters had done her friends the courtesy of mentioning Covenant’s name aloud. And of course even the Masters could only speculate about Jeremiah.

Then the light reached the cluster of horses and their riders within the gates; and Linden forgot everything except the faces that she loved more dearly than any others she had ever known.

Unconscious that she was moving again, she hurried toward them, chasing the limits of the ambiguous illumination.

The inadequacy of the torches blurred their features. Nevertheless she could not be mistaken about them. Every flensed line of Covenant’s form was familiar to her. Even his clothes--his old jeans and boots, and the T-shirt that had seen too much wear and pain--were as she remembered them. When he held up his hands, she could see that the right lacked its last two fingers. His strict gaze caught and held the light redly, as if he were afire with purpose and desire.

And Jeremiah was imprinted on her heart. She knew his gangling teenaged body as intimately as her own. His tousled hair and slightly scruffy cheeks, smudged here and there with dirt or shadows, could belong to no one else. He still wore the sky-blue pajamas with the mustangs rampant across the chest in which she had dressed him for bed days or worlds earlier, although they were torn now, and stained with grime or blood. And, like Covenant’s, his right hand had been marred by the amputation of two fingers, in his case the first two.

Only the eagerness which enlivened the muddy color of his eyes violated Linden’s knowledge of him.

The light expanded as more torches were lit. Holding brands high, the Humbled followed her, joined by her friends; followed as if she pulled them along behind her, drawing their fires with her. Now she could see clearly the cut in Covenant’s shirt where he had been stabbed, and the old scar on his forehead. Flames lit his eyes like threats; demands. His appearance was only slightly changed. After ten years and more than three millennia, the grey

was gone from his hair: he looked younger despite his gauntness. And the marks of the wounds that he had received while Linden had known him were gone as well, burned away by his consummation in wild magic. Yet every compelling implication of his visage was precious to her.

Nevertheless she did not approach him. Deeper needs sent her hastening toward Jeremiah.

She was still ten paces from her son, however, when Covenant snapped harshly, “Don’t touch him! Don’t touch *either* of us!”

Linden did not stop. She could not. Long days of loss and alarm impelled her. And she had never before seen anything that resembled consciousness in Jeremiah’s eyes. Had never seen him react and move as he did now. She could not stop until she flung her arms around him and felt his heart beating against hers.

At once, his expression became one of dismay; almost of panic. Then he raised his halfhand--and a wave of force like a wall halted her.

It was as warm as steam: except to her health-sense, it was as invisible as vapor. And it was gone in an instant. Yet she remained motionless as if he had frozen her in place. The shock of his power to repulse her deprived her of will and purpose. Even her reflexive desire to embrace him had been stunned.

At a word from Mahrtiir, Bhapa and Pahni moved away to help the Masters tend the horses. The Manethrall remained behind Linden with Liand, Anele, and Stave.

“He’s right,” said Jeremiah: the first words that Linden had ever heard him utter. His voice sounded as unsteady as the torchlight, wavering between childhood and maturity, a boy’s treble and a man’s baritone. “You can’t touch either of us. And you can’t use that Staff.” He grinned hugely. “You’ll make us disappear.”

Among the shadows cast by the flames, she saw a small muscle beating like a pulse at the corner of his left eye.

Read the second half of Chapter 1 on May 9th, 2007!

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