

“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 Mahrtiir studied the exhausted mounts with Ramen concentration while his devoted Cords, Bhapa and Pahni, 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.

Linden might have wept then, overwhelmed by shock and need. Suddenly, however, she had no tears. The Mahdoubt had told her, *Be cautious of love. It misleads. There is a glamour upon it which binds the heart to destruction.* And days ago Covenant had tried to warn her through Anele--

Between one heartbeat and the next, she seemed to find herself in the presence, not of her loved ones, but of her nightmares.

In the emptiness and silence of the high forehall, the old man asked plaintively, “What transpires? Anele sees no one. Only Masters, who have promised his freedom. Is aught amiss?”

No one answered him. Instead Handir stepped forward and bowed to Covenant. “Ur-Lord Thomas Covenant,” he said firmly, “Unbeliever and Earthfriend, you are well come. Be welcome in Revelstone, fist and faith--and your companion with you. Our need is sore, and your coming an unlooked-for benison. We are the Masters of the Land. I am Handir, by right of years and attainment the Voice of the Masters. How may we serve you, with the Demondim massed at our gates, and a perilous journey plain in the exhaustion of your mounts?”

“No,” Linden said before Covenant--or Jeremiah--could respond. “Handir, stop. *Think* about this.”

She spoke convulsively, goaded by inexplicable fears. “The Demondim *allowed* us to escape yesterday. Then they pulled back so that”--she could not say Covenant’s name, or Jeremiah’s, not now; not when she had been forbidden to touch them--“so that these people could get through. Those monsters *want* this.” Her throat closed for a moment. She had to

swallow grief like a mouthful of ashes before she could go on. “Otherwise they would have used the Illearth Stone.”

The Demondim had not planned this. They could not have planned it. They had not known that she would try to protect the Land by snatching them with her out of the past. If Anele had not been possessed by a being of magma and rage, and had not encountered the Vile-spawn--

Surely Covenant and Jeremiah would not be standing in front of her, refusing her, if some powerful enemy had not willed it?

Turning from the Voice of the Masters to Covenant, she demanded, “Are you even real?”

The Dead in Andelain were ghosts; insubstantial. *They* could not be touched--

Covenant faced her with something like mirth or scorn in his harsh gaze. “Hell and blood, Linden,” he drawled. “It’s good to see you haven’t changed. I knew you wouldn’t take all this at face value. I’m glad I can still trust you.”

With his left hand, he beckoned for one of the Humbled. When Branl stepped forward holding a torch, Covenant took the brand from him. Waving the flame from side to side as if to demonstrate his material existence, Covenant remarked, “Oh, we’re real enough.” Aside to Jeremiah, he added, “Show her.”

Still grinning, Jeremiah reached into the waistband of his pajamas and drew out a bright red toy racing car--the same car that Linden had seen him holding before Sheriff Lytton’s deputies had opened fire. He tossed it lightly back and forth between his hands for a moment, then tucked it away again. His manner said as clearly as words, *See, Mom? See?*

Linden studied his pajamas urgently for bullet holes. But the fabric was too badly torn and stained to give any indication of what happened to him before he had been drawn to the Land.

None of the Masters spoke. Apparently they understood that her questions required answers.

Abruptly Covenant handed his torch back to Branl. As Branl withdrew to stand with Galt and Clyme, Covenant returned his attention to Linden.

“This isn’t easy for you. I know that.” Now his voice sounded hoarse with disuse. He seemed to pick his words as though he had difficulty remembering the ones he wanted. “Trust me, it isn’t easy for us either.

“We’re here. But we aren’t *just* here.” Then he sighed. “There’s no good way to explain it. You don’t have the experience to understand it.” His brief smile reminded her that she had rarely seen such an expression on his face. Roger had smiled at her more often. “Jeremiah is *here*, but Foul still has him. *I’m* here, but I’m still part of the Arch of Time.

“You could say I’ve folded time so we can be in two places at once. Or two realities.” Another smile flickered across his mouth, contradicted by the flames reflecting in his eyes. “Being part of Time has some advantages. Not many. There are too many limitations, and the strain is fierce. But I can still do a few tricks.”

For a moment, his hands reached out as if he wanted something from her; but he pulled them back almost at once.

“The problem with what I’m doing,” he said trenchantly, “is that you’ve got too much power, and it’s the wrong kind for me. Being in two places at once breaks a lot of rules.” This time, his smile resembled a grimace. “If you touch either one of us--or if you use that Staff--you’ll undo the fold. Time will snap back into shape.

“It’s like your son says,” he finished. “We’ll disappear. I’m not strong enough to keep

us here.”

“Your son?” Liand breathed. “Linden, is this your *son*?”

“Liand, no,” Mahrtiir instructed at once. “Do not speak. This lies beyond us. The Ringwielder will meet our questions when greater matters have been resolved.”

Linden did not so much as glance at them. But she could no longer look at Covenant. The torchlight in his eyes, and his unwonted smiles, daunted her. She understood nothing. She wanted to scoff at the idea of folding time. Or perhaps she merely yearned to reject the thought that she might undo such theurgy. How could she bear to be in his presence, and in Jeremiah’s, without touching them?

As if she were turning her back, she shifted so that she faced only her son.

“Jeremiah, honey--” she began. Oh, Jeremiah! Her eyes burned, although she had no tears. “None of this makes sense. Is he telling the truth?”

Had her son been restored to her for *this*? And was he truly still in Lord Foul’s grasp, suffering the Despiser’s wealth of torments in some other dimension or manifestation of time?

She was unable to see the truth for herself. Covenant and her son were closed to her, as they were to Stave and the Masters.

An *Elohim* had warned the Ramen as well as Liand’s people to *Beware the halfhand*.

Jeremiah gazed at her with a frown. He seemed to require a visible effort to set aside his excitement. “You know he is, Mom.” His tone held an unexpected edge of reproach; of impatience with her confusion and yearning. “He’s *Thomas Covenant*. You can see that. He’s already saved the Land twice. He can’t be anybody else.”

But then he appeared to take pity on her. Ducking his head, he added softly, “What you can’t see is how much it hurts that I’m not *just* here.”

For years, she had hungered for the sound of her son’s voice; starved for it as though it were the nurturance that would give her life meaning. Yet now every word from his mouth only multiplied her chagrin.

Why could she not weep? She had always shed tears too easily. Surely her sorrow and bafflement were great enough for sobbing? Still her eyes remained dry; arid as a wilderland.

“All you have to do is trust me,” Covenant put in. “Or if you can’t do that, trust *him*.” He nodded toward Jeremiah. “We can do this. We can make it come out right. That’s another advantage I have. *We* have. We know what needs to be done.”

Angry because she had no other outlet, Linden wheeled back to confront the Unbeliever. “Is that a fact?” Her tone was acid. She had come to this: her beloved and her son were restored to her, and she treated them like foes. “Then tell me something. Why did the Demondim let you live? Hell, why have they left any of us alive? It was just yesterday that they wanted to kill us.”

Jeremiah laughed as if he were remembering one of the many jokes that she had told him over the years; jokes with which she had attempted to provoke a reaction when he was incapable of any response. The muscle at the corner of his left eye continued its tiny beat. But Covenant glared at her, and the fires in his gaze seemed hotter than any of the torches.

“Another trick,” he told her sourly. “An illusion.” He made a dismissive gesture with his halfhand. “Oh, I didn’t have anything to do with what happened yesterday.” Despite its size, the forehall seemed full of *halfhands*, the Humbled as well as Covenant and Jeremiah. “That’s a different issue. But they let Jeremiah and me get through because”--Covenant shrugged stiffly-- “well, I suppose you could say I put a crimp in their reality. Just a little one. I’m already stretched pretty thin. I can’t do too many things at once. So I made us look like *bait*. Like we

were leading them into an ambush. Like there's a kind of power here they don't understand. That's why they just chased us instead of attacking. They want to contain us until they figure out what's going on. And maybe they like the idea of trapping all their enemies in one place."

Again he smiled at Linden, although his eyes continued to glare. "Are you satisfied? At least for now? Can I talk to Handir for a minute? Jeremiah and I need rest. You have no idea of the strain--"

He sighed heavily. "And we have to get ready before those Demondim realize I made fools out of them. Once that happens, they're going to unleash the Illearth Stone. Then hellfire and bloody damnation won't be something we just talk about. They'll be *real*, and they'll be *here*."

Apparently he wanted Linden to believe that he was tired. Yet to her ordinary eyes he looked potent enough to defeat the horde unaided.

And her son seemed to *belong* with him.

She could not identify them with her health-sense. Jeremiah and Covenant were as blank, as isolated from her, as they would have been in her natural world. Yet there she would have been able to at least *touch* them. Here, in the unrevealing light of the torches, and fraught with shadows, Jeremiah seemed as distant and irreparable as the Unbeliever, in spite of his obvious alert sentience.

If Covenant could do all of this, why had he told her to *find* him?

Bowing her head, Linden forced herself to take a step backward, and another, into the cluster of her friends. She ached for the comfort of their support. She could discern them clearly enough: Liand's open amazement, his concern on her behalf; Mahrtiir's rapt eagerness and wonder and suspicion; Anele's distracted mental wandering. Even Stave's impassivity and his ruined eye and his new hurts felt more familiar to her than Covenant and Jeremiah, her loved ones. Yet the complex devotion of those who stood with her gave no anodyne for what she had gained and lost.

Linden, find me.

Be cautious of love.

She needed the balm of touching Covenant; of hugging and *hugging* Jeremiah, running her fingers through his hair, stroking his cheeks-- But she had been refused. Even the warm clean fire of the Staff of Law had been forbidden to her.

Covenant nodded with an air of satisfaction. Then both he and Jeremiah turned to the Voice of the Masters.

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to keep you waiting." For a moment, Covenant's voice held an unwonted note of uncton, although he suppressed it quickly. "You know Linden. When she has questions, she insists on answers." He grinned as if he were sharing a joke with Handir. "You have to respect that."

Then he swallowed his smile. "You said we're well come. You have no idea how well come we are.

"You speak for the Masters?"

Abruptly Linden swung away from them. She could no longer bear the sight of her son's eagerness and denial. She wished that she could close her ears to the sound of Covenant's voice.

In the light of the torches, her friends studied her. Liand's curiosity and puzzlement had become alarm, and Mahrtiir glowered. Stave's single eye regarded her with characteristic stoicism. Anele's moonstone blindness shifted uncertainly around the great hall as though he were trying to recapture an elusive glimpse of significance.

Because her nerves burned for human contact--for any touch which might reassure her--she hooked her arms around Liand's and Mahrtiir's shoulders. At once, Liand gave her a hug like a promise that she could rely on him, whatever happened. And after an instant of hesitation, Mahrtiir did the same. Through his dislike of impending rock and the lack of open skies, she tasted his readiness to fight any foe in her name.

With senses other than sight, she felt Handir bowing to Covenant a second time, although the Voice of the Masters had never bowed to her.

"I am Handir," he began again, "by right of--"

"Of years and attainment," interrupted Covenant brusquely. "The Voice of the Masters." Now his manner seemed to betray the exertion he had claimed; the difficulty of folding time. "I heard you the first time.

"Handir, I know you're worried about the Demondim. You should be. You and your people can't hold out against them. Not if they use the Stone. But they're unsure of themselves right now. By hell, Foul himself is probably having fits." Grim pleasure glinted through the impatience in Covenant's tone. "They'll realize the truth eventually. But I've been pretty clever, if I do say so myself." With her peripheral vision, Linden saw Jeremiah's nod, his happy grin. "I think we might have a day, or even two, before the real shit hits the fan."

To her friends, Linden murmured, "Don't say anything. Just listen." She could not bear to be questioned. Not now. She was in too much pain. "That's Thomas Covenant and my son. My Jeremiah. I *know* them.

"But there's something wrong here. Something dangerous. Maybe it's just the strain of what they're doing." Being in two places at once? "Maybe that's making them both a little crazy." Or maybe the Despiser had indeed *done* something. Maybe the *Elohim* had sought to warn the Land against *the halfhand* for good reason. "Whatever it is, I need your help.

"Mahrtiir, I want Bhapa and Pahni to stay with Liand and Anele." Liand opened his mouth to protest, but Linden's grip on his shoulder silenced him. "The Masters won't threaten you," she told him. "I trust them that far," in spite of what the Humbled and Handir had done to Stave. They were *Haruchai*. "But I have to be alone, and I'll feel better if Bhapa and Pahni are with you." She had seen Ramen Cords fight: she knew what Bhapa and Pahni could do. "Whatever is going on here, it might have consequences that we can't imagine." *Don't touch him! Don't touch either of us!* To Mahrtiir, she added, "They should be safe enough in Liand's room."

In response, the Manethrall nodded his assent.

"Anele is confused," the old man informed the air of the forehall. "He feels Masters and urgency, but the cause is hidden. The stone tells him nothing."

Linden ignored him. Covenant was still speaking to Handir.

"What Jeremiah and I want right now is a place where we can rest without being disturbed. Some food, and maybe some springwine, if you've got it. We have to gather our strength."

Linden tried to ignore him as well. "As for you," she continued to Mahrtiir, "I need you to guide me out of here. To the plateau." He and his Cords had spent the night there. He would know the way. "I can't *think* like this. I need daylight."

She might find what she sought in the potent waters of Glimmermere. The lake could not give her answers, but it might help her to remember who she was.

The Manethrall nodded again. When he left her so that he could speak to Pahni and Bhapa, she turned to Stave. The tasks that she had in mind for him would be harder--

Meeting his gaze with her dry, burning eyes, she said, "I want you to find the Mahdoubt for me. Please." *Be cautious of love.* "I need to talk to her." That strange, kindly woman had given Linden a hint of what was in store. If Linden probed her directly, she might say more. "And keep the Humbled away from me. If you can. I can't face their distrust right now."

Her memories of Glimmermere--of Thomas Covenant as he had once been--were private and precious. She could not expose them, or herself, to anyone: certainly not to the demeaning suspicions of Branl, Galt, or Clyme.

Stave did not hesitate. "Chosen, I will," he said as if obstructing the actions of the Masters were a trivial challenge.

At least he was still able to hear his people's thoughts--

Behind Linden, Covenant appeared to be nearing the end of his exchange with Handir. His voice had become a hoarse rasp, thick with effort. Yet when she glanced at him at last, Linden saw that he was smiling again.

At Covenant's side, Jeremiah seemed hardly able to contain his anticipation. The only sign that he might still be in Lord Foul's power was the rapid beating at the corner of his eye.

"I know what to do," Covenant assured the Voice of the Masters. "That's why we're here. When we're done, your problems will be over. But first I'll have to convince Linden, and that won't be easy. I'm too tired to face it right now.

"Just give us a place to rest. And keep her away from us until I'm ready. We'll take care of everything else." Darkly he avowed, "I know a trick or two to make the Demondim and even the almighty Despiser wish they had never come out of hiding."

In spite of her clenched dismay, Linden found herself wondering where he had learned such things. How much of his humanity had he lost by his participation in Time? What had the perspective of eons done to him? How much had he changed?

And how much pain had her son suffered in the Despiser's grasp? How much was he suffering at this moment? If even the tainted respite of being in two places at once filled him with such glee--

In many ways, she had never truly known him. Yet he, too, may have become someone she could no longer recognize.

She needed to *do* something. She needed to do it *now*. If she waited for Covenant to explain himself, she would crumble.

While Handir replied to the ur-Lord, the Unbeliever, the Land's ancient savior--while the Voice of the Masters promised Covenant everything that he had requested--Linden strode away into the shadows of the forehall, trusting Mahrtiir to claim a torch and catch up with her before she lost herself in darkness.

Read the first half of Chapter 2 on July 9th, 2007!

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