

“The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”

Book One

The Runes of the Earth

Prologue

Chapter One: Mother’s Son

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Prologue

Chapter One: Mother’s Son

“No, Mr Covenant,” she repeated for the third time. “I can’t do that.”

Ever since he had entered her office, she had wished that he would go away.

He gazed at her as if he had not heard a word. “I don’t see the problem, Dr Avery.” His voice cast echoes of his father through her, flashes of memory like spangles off a surface of troubled water. “I’m her son. I have the right. And it’s my responsibility.” Despite the differences, even his features dragged a tangled net across her heart, dredging up aches and longing. “She’s nothing to you, just a problem you can’t solve. A burden on the taxpayers. A waste of resources you could use to help someone else.” His eyes were too wide-set, his whole face too broad. The flesh of his cheeks and jaw hinted at self-indulgence.

And yet--

If he were clay, only a slice or two with the sculptor’s tool, only a line of severity on either side of his mouth, and his cheeks would look as strict as commandments. A squint of old suffering at the corners of his eyes: a little grey dust to add years to his hair. His eyes themselves were exactly the right color, a disturbed hue like the shade of madness or prophecy. Oh, he could have been his father, if he had not been so young and unmarked. If he had paid any price as extravagant as his father’s--

He was certainly insistent enough to be Thomas Covenant.

He seemed to face her through a haze of recall, reminding her of the man she had loved. The man who had risen in fear and fury to meet his harsh fate.

Avoiding the young man’s gaze, she looked around the walls of her office without seeing them. At another time, the strict professionalism of this space might have eased her. Her displayed diplomas, like her tidy desk and heavy filing cabinets, served to vouch for her. She had found comfort among them on other occasions. But today they had no effect.

How many times had she held Thomas Covenant in her arms? Too few: not enough to satisfy her hunger for them.

She still wore his white gold wedding ring on a silver chain around her neck. It was all that she had left of him.

“I can reach her, Dr Avery,” the son continued in a voice which was too bland to be his father’s. “You can’t. You’ve been trying for years. I’m sure you’ve done your best. But if you could have reached her, she would be sane by now. It’s time to let her go. Let me have her.”

“Mr Covenant,” she insisted, “I’ll say it again. I can’t do that. The law in this state won’t allow it. Professional ethics won’t allow it.”

I won’t allow it.

Joan Covenant was as unreachable as her son claimed. She might as well have been catatonic, in spite of every conceivable drug and therapy. In fact, she would have died long ago without constant care. But she was not “nothing” to Linden Avery. If Roger Covenant believed

that, he would never understand the woman who stood in his way.

His mother was Thomas Covenant's ex-wife. Ten years ago, Linden had watched Covenant trade his life for Joan's--and smile to reassure her. That smile had ripped Linden's heart from its hiding place, rent away its protective lies and commitments. Sometimes she believed that everything which she had now done and become had started then. Covenant's smile had triggered a detonation which had blown her free of her own parents' hunger for death. The new woman who had emerged from that explosion loved Thomas Covenant from the bottom of her soul.

For his sake, she would not abandon Joan.

Yet now Roger Covenant sat across her desk from her, demanding his mother's release. If she had been the kind of woman who found the folly of the misguided amusing, she would have laughed in his face. Where did he get the nerve?

Hell, where did he get the *idea*?

"I'm sorry." Apparently he wanted to be polite. "I still don't see the problem. She's my mother. I'm her son. I'm willing to take care of her. How can the law object? How can *you*, Dr Avery? I don't understand why she and I haven't already left."

She turned away for a moment to look out the window. It gave her an unilluminating view of the parking lot, where her worn old car crouched over its rust, waiting for the day when its welds would fail and it could finally slump into scrap. She had kept it only because it had carried her to her first encounters with Thomas Covenant.

If Roger would not leave, surely she could simply drive away? Go out to her car, coax its engine to life, and return to Jeremiah?

No. If she had wanted to be a woman who fled whenever her job became difficult, she should have bought herself a more reliable vehicle.

Old habit lifted her hand to press the hard circle of Covenant's ring through her blouse. Sighing, she faced his son again.

"Let me try to be plain. Whether or not you understand is beside the point. The point is this. Unless and until you bring me a court order signed by a judge instructing me to release Joan Covenant to your custody, she stays where she is. End of discussion." She gazed at him expectantly. When he failed to take the hint, she added, "That's your cue to leave, Mr Covenant."

Don't you understand that you're not the only person here who cares about her?

However, she doubted that Roger Covenant cared at all for his mute mother. His oblivious manner, and the incipient madness or prophecy in his eyes, conveyed an entirely different impression.

He had explained that he had not come for Joan earlier because he had not been old enough. But he had passed his twenty-first birthday yesterday. Now he was ready. Yet Linden believed intuitively that he had some hidden purpose which outweighed love or concern.

In his unwavering insistence, he reminded her of some of the more plausible psychotics she had known in her tenure as Chief Medical Officer for the Berenford Memorial Psychiatric Hospital. But perhaps he suffered from nothing more treatable than terminal narcissism, in which case he was telling her the simple truth. He could not "see the problem."

This time, however, something in her tone--or in the conflicted fire mounting behind her eyes--must have penetrated his strange unction. Before she could offer to call Security, he rose to his feet as if he comprehended her at last.

Immediately she stood as well. She saw now that he was an inch or two shorter than his

father, and broader in the torso. For that reason, among others, he would never evince the particular gauntness, the cut and flagrant sense of purpose--all compromise and capacity for surrender flensed away--which had made Thomas Covenant irrefusable to her.

He would never be the man his father was. He had too much of his mother in him. His carriage exposed him: the slight looseness in his shoulders; the tension which compensated for his poor balance. His arms seemed full of truncated gestures, expressions of honesty or appeal cut off prematurely. Behind his insistence, Linden heard hints of Joan's weakness, forlorn and fundamentally betrayed.

Perhaps his real desires had nothing to do with his mother. Perhaps he simply wanted to prove himself his father's equal. Or to supplant him--

When Roger had gained his feet, however, he did not admit defeat. Instead he asked, "Can I see her? It's been years." He offered Linden an affectless smile. "And there's something I want to show you."

In spite of her impatience, she nodded. "Of course. You can visit her right now." Strangely, his apparent emptiness saddened her: she grieved on his behalf. Thomas Covenant had taught her that ignorance--like innocence--had no power to ward itself against harm. Because Roger did not understand, he could not be saved from suffering.

When he saw Joan's unique plight, either his incomprehension would hold against her, or it would not. In either case, the experience might convince him to leave Linden alone.

For that reason, she gestured him toward the door. She had already done her rounds; and her paperwork could wait. Certainly her patients had no immediate need of her. At its heart, Berenford Memorial existed, not to heal its occupants, but to help them heal themselves.

Suddenly cooperative, as if he had gained an important concession, Roger preceded her out of her office. Now his smile struck her as reflexive; an unconscious expression of eagerness.

Closing the door behind her, Linden led him through the edifice where she did the work with which she attempted to fill Covenant's place in her heart. His place--and the Land's--

Inadvertently she remembered the sound of Pitchwife's voice as he sang,

My heart has rooms that sigh with dust

And ashes in the hearth.

At times the contrast between her experiences with Thomas Covenant and her years at Berenford Memorial discouraged her. Surely her contest with the madness of her patients could not compare with the sheer glory of Thomas Covenant's struggle to redeem the Land? Nevertheless she closed her throat and continued guiding Roger toward Joan's room. The ache which he elicited was familiar to her, and she knew how to bear it.

Her life here was not less than the one she had lived with Covenant. It was only different. Less grand, perhaps: more ambiguous, with smaller triumphs. But it sufficed.

A short corridor took her out of the Hospital's small administrative wing and across the lobby, past Maxine Dubroff's reception/information station. Maxine worked there nine hours a day, five days a week: an ageing woman who looked like a stork and smiled like an angel, responding to everyone who entered Berenford Memorial with unfailing solicitude. She was a volunteer who had simply attached herself to Linden one day after Linden, on call in ER as she was every third night, had saved the life of Maxine's husband, Ernie. He had been kicked in the chest by a horse: Linden had found and removed a sliver of bone from his left lung. He had recovered to teach the horse better manners; and Maxine had been at Linden's service ever since.

She smiled now as Linden and Roger Covenant crossed the tiled lobby. In spite of Roger's presence, Linden replied with a smile of her own--less seraphic than Maxine's, but no

less sincere. Maxine reminded Linden that she was not alone in her dedication to her work. Like Linden herself, and most of Berenford Memorial's staff, Maxine had committed herself to a need which the county acknowledged but could not meet.

Ten years ago, Joan had been snatched from Thomas Covenant's care by a group of people who were--in the county's eyes--demonstrably insane. For weeks these individuals had nurtured their lunacy and destitution openly, begging for food and shelter and clothing, calling for repentance. Then, one night little more than twenty-four hours after Linden had arrived in town to accept a job at County Hospital, they had kidnapped Joan, leaving Covenant himself unconscious, his home splashed with blood.

They had taken her into the woods behind his home, where they had apparently planned to kill her in some bizarre ritual--a rite which included burning their own hands to stumps in a bonfire built for the purpose. Although no one except Linden knew the truth, that rite had achieved its intended aim. It had lured Covenant into the woods on Joan's trail. There he had exchanged himself for her, and been killed.

In the life which Linden had lived here, she had known him for scarcely thirty-six hours.

After his death, however, the people who had arranged his self-sacrifice had regained some measure of ordinary sanity. Their charred hands and starved bodies had been horrible enough. Those injuries had stretched County Hospital's limits. But the burden of their damaged minds, their aggrieved spirits, had proved harder for the citizens of the area to bear. Collectively the county felt responsible.

In public, most people admitted that they had failed to care for the most desolate and fragile members of their community. Surely unbalanced mothers and fathers would not have thrust, not just their own hands, but the hands of their children as well, into the flames if their destitution had not been neglected by the more stable souls around them? Surely those wounded men and women would have eschewed such violence if they had been offered any other recourse? No matter how many demented preachers urged them to fanaticism? Listening to children in cruel pain sob through the night taught the well-meaning people of the county to desire some form of prevention.

Yet this sense of communal guilt ran deeper than most people would acknowledge. On some level, the entire county understood that the terrible events which had led to Covenant's murder would never have happened if he had not been shunned and execrated, forced into the traditional role of the outcast, the pariah. He had been, inexplicably, a leper: he had what the doctors called a "primary" case of Hansen's disease, one with no known etiology. Such cases were rare, even by the standards of an illness as rare as leprosy, but they occurred often enough to suggest the wrath of God; punishment for sins so vile that they sickened the sinner.

Viscerally frightened and full of loathing, people had spurned Thomas Covenant as if he were a carrier of corruption. For over a decade, he had occupied Haven Farm on sufferance: seeing no one, never coming to town, avoided by his neighbors; occasionally harassed by the county sheriff, Barton Lytton; uncomfortably tolerated by his own lawyer, Megan Roman; befriended only by Julius Berenford, then Chief of Staff at County Hospital. Indeed, the county's repugnance for Covenant's illness would have driven him into exile if he had not once saved the life of a snake-bitten girl. In addition, however, he made significant contributions to the care of the county's indigents--money which he earned by writing novels about guilt and power. In effect, he had supported the very people who brought about his death: the same people, presumably, who had driven his ex-wife mad. Therefore he was tolerated.

Then he was gone, irretrievable, leaving only Joan and Linden behind.

Dr Berenford believed that he had been too silent while Covenant lived. Afterward he raised his voice. Impelled by her own regrets, Megan Roman acted on his words. And the voters and politicians of the county felt more responsible than they cared to admit. They lobbied the state legislature: they passed mill levies: they applied for grants.

Eventually they built Berenford Memorial Psychiatric Hospital, named for Julius when he had slipped away in his sleep one night five years ago. And they appointed Linden as Berenford Memorial's CMO. She was the only one among them who had accompanied Covenant to his last crisis.

Now she presided over a small facility of twenty beds, all in private rooms. Her staff included five nurses, five orderlies, one janitor, one maintenance man, and a coterie of part-time secretaries, in addition to volunteers like Maxine Dubroff. Berenford Memorial had two psychiatrists on call. And one physician--herself--with a background in emergency room medicine and family practice: trauma, triage, and pink eye.

From the lobby, she guided Covenant's son upstairs to the "acute care" wing: ten beds devoted to patients who were inclined to injure themselves, assault the staff, or run away at random opportunities. Instead of proceeding to Joan's room, however, she paused at the top of the stairs and turned to face Roger.

"A moment, if you don't mind, Mr Covenant. May I ask you a question?" When he had seen his mother, he might not give her another chance. "The more I think about it, the less I understand why you're here."

Again his smile seemed merely reflexive. "What is there to understand? She's my mother. Why wouldn't I want to see her?"

"Of course," Linden countered. "But what inspired your desire to take care of her? That's not as common as you might think. Frankly, it sounds a little"--the term she wished to use was *de trop*, existentially dislocated--"daunting."

In response, Roger's manner seemed to sharpen. "The last time I saw her," he replied precisely, "she told me that if she failed I would need to take her place. Until yesterday I didn't have the resources to do that."

Involuntarily Linden caught her breath as the bottom of her stomach seemed to fall away. "Failed at what?"

Long ago, Joan had sought out Thomas Covenant--no, not sought out, she had been *sent*--in order to teach him despair. Despite her terrible plight, however, and her thirst for his blood, she had failed absolutely.

"Isn't that obvious?" Covenant's son returned. "She's here, isn't she? Wouldn't you call that failure?"

No. For a moment, Linden's heart quailed. Memories beat about her head like wings: she felt harried by furies.

Her face must have betrayed her chagrin. Solicitously, Roger reached out to touch her arm. "Dr Avery, are you all right?" Then he dropped his hand. "I really think you should let me take her. It would be better for everyone."

Even you, he seemed to say. Especially you.

Take her place.

Ten years ago, empowered by all of those hands thrust into the flames, all of that ceded pain, as well as by the fatal rush of Thomas Covenant's blood, a bitter malevolence had pierced the reality of Linden's life. It had drawn her in Covenant's wake to another place, another dimension of existence. The psychiatrists on call at Berenford Memorial would have called it a

“psychotic episode”--an *extended* psychotic episode. With Covenant, she had been summoned to a realm known as the Land, where she had been immersed in evil until she was altered almost beyond recognition. During the black hours of that one night, before Julius Berenford had found her with Covenant’s body, she had somehow spent several months outside--or deep within--herself, striving to win free of her own weakness and the legacy of her parents in order to preserve the beauty of a world which had never been meant for corruption.

Now Roger’s words seemed to suggest that she would have to face it all again.

No. Shuddering, she came back to herself. It was impossible. She was flinching at shadows, echoes. Roger’s father was dead. There would be no second summons for her. The Land was Thomas Covenant’s doom, not hers. He had given his life for it, as he had for Joan, and so its enemy, the dark being known variously as a-Jeroth, the Grey Slayer, and Lord Foul the Despiser, had been defeated.

Trusting in that, Linden set aside her alarm and faced Covenant’s son.

Roger’s implied threat she ignored. Instead she asked, “What do you mean, you have the ‘resources’ to take her place?”

“It’s simple,” Roger replied. He seemed to misunderstand her without being aware of it. “I’m twenty-one now. I’m of age. Yesterday I inherited my father’s legacy.

“Of course,” he explained as if Linden might have forgotten, “he left everything to my mother. Haven Farm. His royalties. But she was declared incompetent when she was committed here. Ms Roman--you know her, my father’s lawyer--has been trustee of the estate. But now it’s all mine.” His smile hinted at self-satisfaction. “Once I’ve persuaded you to release her, she and I will live on Haven Farm.

“She’ll like that. She and my father were happy there.”

Linden swallowed a groan. Thomas and Joan Covenant had lived on Haven Farm until his leprosy had been diagnosed. Then she had left him, abandoned him; divorced him to protect their son from his illness. No doubt she had believed that she was doing the right thing. Nevertheless the knowledge of her own frailty--the awareness that she had broken her vows when her husband had needed her most--had given the Despiser a foothold in her soul. Her shame was fertile soil for the seeds of despair and madness.

And when she had been deprived of every conscious impulse except the desire to taste her ex-husband’s blood, Covenant had cared for her on Haven Farm until the end. The idea that Joan would “like” living there again nearly brought tears to Linden’s eyes.

And Roger had not answered her real question.

“That isn’t what I meant,” she insisted thickly. “You said she told you to take her place if she failed. Now you have the resources do that.”

“Did I?” His smile remained expressionless. “You must have misheard me. Now I can take *your* place, Dr Avery. I have enough money to care for her. We have a home. I can afford all the help I need.

“She isn’t the only one who failed.”

Linden frowned to conceal a wince. She herself had failed Joan: she knew that. She failed all her patients. But she also knew that her failure was beside the point. It did nothing to diminish the value or the necessity of her chosen work.

And she was sure that she had not “misheard” Roger.

Abruptly she decided not to waste any more time questioning him. For all practical purposes, he was impervious to inquiry. And he had nothing to say which might sway her.

Surely he would leave when he had seen his mother?

Without challenging his falseness, she drew him forward again, toward Joan's room.

Along the way, she explained, "This is where we keep our more disturbed patients. They aren't necessarily more damaged or in more pain than the people downstairs. But they manifest violent symptoms of one form or another. We've had to keep your mother under restraint for the past year. Before that--"

Linden temporarily spared herself more detail by pushing open Joan's door with her shoulder and leading Roger into his mother's room.

Out in the hall, the characteristic smell of hospitals was less prominent, but here it was unmistakable: an ineradicable admixture of betadyne and blood, harsh cleansers and urine, human sweat, fear, floor wax, and anesthetics, accented by an inexplicable tang of formalin. For some reason, medical care always produced the same scents.

The room was spacious by the standard of private rooms in County Hospital next door. A large window let in the kind of sunlight that sometimes helped fragile psyches recover their balance. The bed occupied the center of the floor. An unused TV set jutted from one wall near the ceiling. The only piece of advanced equipment present was a pulse monitor, its lead attached to a clip on the index finger of Joan's left hand. According to the monitor, her pulse was steady, untroubled.

On a stand by the head of the bed sat a box of cotton balls, a bottle of sterile saline, a jar of petroleum jelly, and a vase of bright flowers. The flowers had been Maxine Dubroff's idea, but Linden had adopted it immediately. For years now she had arranged for the delivery of flowers to all her patients on a regular basis, the brighter the better. In every language which she could devise or imagine, she strove to convince her patients that they were in a place of care.

Joan sat upright in the bed, staring blankly at the door. Restraints secured her arms to the rails of the bed. Her bonds were loose enough to let her scratch her nose or adjust her posture, although she never did those things.

In fact, one of the nurses or orderlies must have placed her in that position. Fortunately for her caregivers, Joan had become a compliant patient: she remained where she was put. Pulled to her feet, she stood. Stretched out on the bed, she lay still. She swallowed food placed in her mouth. Sometimes she chewed. When she was taken into the bathroom, she voided. But she did not react to words or voices, gave no indication that she was aware of the people who tended her.

Her stare never wavered: she hardly seemed to blink. Standing or reclining, her disfocused gaze regarded neither care nor hope. If she ever slept, she did so with her eyes open.

Her years of catatonia had marked her poignantly. The skin of her face had hung slack on its bones for so long now that the underlying muscles had atrophied, giving her a look of mute horror. Despite the program of exercises which Linden had prescribed for her, and which the orderlies carried out diligently, her limbs had wasted to a pitiful frailty. And nothing that Linden or the nurses could do--nothing that any of the experts whom Linden had consulted could suggest--spared her from losing her teeth over the years. No form of nourishment, oral or IV, no brushing or other imposed care, could replace her body's need for ordinary use. In effect, she had experienced more mortality than her chronological years could contain. Helpless to do otherwise, her flesh bore the burden of too much time.

"Hello, Joan," Linden said as she always did when she entered the room. The detached confidence of her tone assumed that Joan could hear her in spite of all evidence to the contrary. "How are you today?"

Nevertheless Joan's plight tugged at her heart. A sore the size of Linden's palm

stigmatized Joan's right temple. A long series of blows had given her a deep bruise which had eventually begun to ooze blood as the skin stretched and cracked, too stiff to heal. Now a dripping red line veined with yellow and white ran down her cheek in spite of everything that could be done to treat it.

When the bruise had first begun to bleed, Linden had covered it with a bandage; but that had made Joan frantic, causing her to thrash against her restraints until she threatened to break her own bones. Now Linden concentrated on trying to reduce the frequency of the blows. On her orders, the wound was allowed to bleed: cleaned several times a day, slathered with antibiotics and salves to counteract an incessant infection, but left open to the air. Apparently it calmed Joan in some way.

Roger stopped just inside the door and stared at his mother. His face betrayed no reaction. Whatever he felt remained closed within him, locked into his heart. Linden had expected surprise, shock, dismay, indignation, perhaps even compassion; but she saw none. The undefined lines of his face gave her no hints.

Without shifting his gaze, he asked softly, "Who hit her?"

He didn't sound angry. Hell, Linden thought, he hardly sounded interested--

She sighed. "She did it to herself. That's why she's restrained."

Moving to the side of the bed, she took a couple of cotton balls, moistened them with sterile saline, and gently began to mop Joan's cheek. One soft stroke at a time, she wiped away the blood upward until she reached the seeping wound. Then she used more cotton balls to dab at the wound itself, trying to clean it without hurting Joan.

Linden would have cared for her carefully in any case; but her devotion to Thomas Covenant inspired an extra tenderness in her.

"It started a year ago. Until then we kept her downstairs. She'd been unreactive for so long, we never thought that she might be a danger to herself. But then she began punching at her temple. As hard as she can."

Hard enough to wear calluses on her knuckles.

"At first it wasn't very often. Once every couple of days, no more. But that didn't last long. Soon she was doing it several times a day. Then several times an hour. We brought her up her, tied her wrists. That seemed to work for a while. But then she got out of the restraints--"

"Got out?" Roger put in abruptly. "How?"

For the first time since he had entered the room, he looked at Linden instead of at Joan.

Avoiding his eyes, Linden gazed out the window. Past the institutional profile of County Hospital next door, she could see a stretch of blue sky, an almost luminous azure, free of fault. Spring offered the county days like this occasionally, days when the air reminded her of *diamondraught*, and the illimitable sky seemed deep enough to swallow away all the world's hurts.

Today it gave her little comfort.

"We don't know," she admitted. "We've never been able to figure it out. Usually it happens late at night, when she's alone. We come in the next morning, find her free. Blood pumping from her temple. Blood on her fist. For a while we had her watched twenty-four hours a day. Then we set up video cameras, recorded everything. As far as we can tell, the restraints just fall off her. Then she hits herself until we make her stop."

"And she still does?" Roger's manner had intensified.

Linden turned from the window to face him again. "Not as much as before. I can get you a copy of the tapes if you want. You can watch for yourself. Now it only happens three or

four times a night. Occasionally during the day, not often.”

“What changed?” he asked.

Gazing at him, she remembered that his father had done everything in his power to protect both Joan and her. Roger’s stare conveyed the impression that he would not have done the same.

Her shoulders sagged, and she sighed again. “Mr Covenant, you have to understand this. She was going to kill herself. One punch at a time, she was beating herself to death. We tried everything we could think of. Even electroshock--which I loathe. During the first six or seven months, we gave her an entire pharmacy of sedatives, tranquilizers, soporifics, stimulants, neural inhibitors, beta blockers, SSRIs, anti-seizure drugs--enough medication to comatize a horse. Nothing worked. Nothing even slowed her down. She was killing herself.”

Apparently something within her required those blows. Linden considered it possible that the Land’s old enemy had left a delayed compulsion like a post-hypnotic suggestion in Joan’s shattered mind, commanding her to bring about her own death.

Not for the first time, Linden wondered what Sheriff Lytton had said or done to Joan during the brief time when she had been in his care. When Julius Berenford had driven to Haven Farm after Covenant’s murder, he had found Joan there: confused and frightened, with no memory of what had transpired; but able to speak and respond. Wishing to search for Covenant and Linden without interference, Julius had sent Joan to County Hospital with Barton Lytton; and by the time they had reached the hospital Joan’s mind was gone. Linden had asked Lytton what he had done, of course, pushed him for an answer; but he had told her nothing.

“And she was getting worse,” Linden went on. “More frantic. Hysterical. She hit herself more often. Sometimes she refused to eat, went days without food. She fought us so hard that it took three orderlies and a nurse to fix an IV. She began to lose alarming amounts of blood.”

“What changed?” Roger repeated intently. “What did you do?”

Linden hesitated on the edge of risks which she had not meant to take. Without warning the air of Joan’s room seemed crowded with dangerous possibilities. How much of the truth could she afford to expose to this unformed and foolish young man?

But then she tightened her resolve and met his question squarely. “Three months ago, I gave her back her wedding ring.”

Without glancing away from him, Linden reached to the collar of Joan’s nightgown and lifted it aside to reveal the delicate silver chain hanging around her neck. From the end of the chain, still hidden by the nightgown, dangled a white gold wedding band. Joan had lost so much weight that she could not have kept a ring on any of her fingers.

Roger’s smile hinted at sudden hungers. “I’m impressed, Dr Avery. That was obviously the right thing to do. But I would not have expected--“ He stopped short of saying that he would not have expected such insight from her. “How did you figure it out? What made you think of it?”

Committed now, Linden shrugged. “It just came to me one night.

“I don’t know how much you know about the end of your father’s life. For the last two weeks before he was killed, he took care of Joan.” On Haven Farm. “She had already lost her mind, but she wasn’t like this. In some ways, she was much worse. Practically rabid. The only thing that calmed her was the taste of your father’s blood. When he needed to feed her, or clean her, he would let her scratch him until she drew blood. Sucking it off his skin would bring her back to herself--for a little while.”

Behind Linden's professional detachment, a secret anger made her hope that she might yet shock or frighten Roger Covenant.

"Now she hits herself, Mr Covenant. She wants the pain for some reason. She needs to hurt herself. I don't know why. As punishment?" For her role in her ex-husband's murder? "It certainly looks like she's punishing herself.

"And she won't tolerate a bandage. Her own bleeding seems to comfort her. Like a kind of restitution-- It helps her regain a little balance. I tried to think of some way to sustain that. If restitution calmed her, I wanted her to have more of it.

"Her ring," the symbol of her marriage, "was the only thing I had that I could restore."

At the time, Linden had placed the chain around Joan's neck with acute trepidation. The language of that gesture could so easily have been misinterpreted; taken as a reminder of guilt rather than as a symbol of love and attachment. However, Joan had lapsed into her comparatively pliant trance as soon as the ring had touched her skin.

Since then Linden had often feared that she had made a terrible mistake: that it was precisely the reminder of guilt which calmed Joan: that Joan's catatonia endured because she had been fundamentally defeated by the touch of white gold. Nevertheless Linden did not remove the ring.

Joan's present trance was all that kept her alive. She could not have survived her battering desperation much longer.

Roger nodded as if Linden's explanation made perfect sense to him. "You did well. Again, I'm impressed." For the first time since Linden had met him--hardly an hour ago--he seemed satisfied. "I can see why you're reluctant to let anyone else take care of her."

At once, however, he resumed his irrational insistence. "But you've done all you can. She won't get any better than this unless I help her."

He raised his hand to forestall Linden's protest. "There are things you don't know about her. About this situation. And I can't explain them. Words won't--" He paused to rephrase his point. "They can't be conveyed in words. The knowledge has to be earned. And you haven't earned it. Not the way I have.

"Let me show you."

She should stop him, Linden thought stupidly. This had gone on too long. Yet she did nothing to intervene as he approached the bed. He had touched a forgotten vulnerability to paralysis deep within her.

Gracelessly he seated himself as close to his mother as the bed-rail permitted. A touch of excitement flushed his cheeks. His respiration quickened. His hands trembled slightly as he undid the restraint on her right wrist.

Flowers cast splotches of color into Linden's eyes, deep red and blue, untroubled yellow. A few minutes ago, she had known exactly what kind of flowers they were: now she had no idea. The sky outside the window seemed unattainable, too far away to offer any hope. The sunlight offered no warmth.

Joan stared past or through Roger vacantly. Linden expected her to strike herself, but she did not. Perhaps the fact that her hand was free had not yet penetrated her subterranean awareness.

Roger lifted his palms to Joan's cheeks, cupped them against her slack flesh. His trembling had become unmistakable. He seemed to quiver with eagerness, avid as a deprived lover. Unsteadily he turned her head until he could gaze straight into the absence of her eyes.

"Mother." His voice shook. "It's me. Roger."

Linden bit down on her lip. All the air in the room seemed to concentrate around the bed, too thick to breathe. In the bonfire where Joan's captors had destroyed their right hands, she had seen eyes like fangs look out hungrily at Covenant's impending murder. At the time, she had believed that they held malice. But now she thought that emotion in them might have been despair; an emptiness which could not be filled.

"Mother."

Joan blinked several times. Her pupils contracted.

With an effort that seemed to stretch the skin of her forehead, her eyes came into focus on her son.

"Roger?" Her disused voice crawled like a wounded thing between her lips. "Is it you?" Suddenly stern, he told her, "Of course it's me. You can see that."

Involuntarily Linden recoiled a step. She tasted blood, felt a pain in her lip. Roger sounded disdainful, vexed, as though Joan were a servant who had disappointed him.

"Oh, Roger." Tears spilled from Joan's eyes. Her free hand fumbled to his shoulder, clutched at his neck. "It's been so long." Her face held no expression: its muscles lacked the strength to convey what she felt. "I've waited so long. It's been so hard. Make it stop."

"Stop complaining." He scolded her as if she were a child. "It isn't as bad as all that. I had to wait until I was twenty-one. You know that."

How--? Linden panted as if she had been struck in the stomach. How--?

How had Roger reached Joan?

How could Joan have known anything?

"I've been good," Joan responded, pleading. "I have." Her damaged voice seemed to flinch and cower at his feet. "See?"

Dropping her arm from his neck, she flung her fist at her bruised temple. Fresh blood smeared her knuckles as she lowered her arm.

"I've been good," she begged. "Make it stop. I can't bear it."

"Nonsense, Mother," Roger snorted. "Of course you can bear it. That's what you do."

But then, apparently, he took pity on her, and his manner softened. "It won't be much longer. I have some things to do. Then I'll make it stop. We'll make it stop together."

Releasing her cheeks, he rose to his feet, turned toward Linden.

As soon as he left the bed, Joan began to scream--a frail, rending sound that seemed to rip from her throat like fabric tearing across jagged glass. As if in sympathy, the pulse monitor emitted a shrill call.

"You see, Dr Avery?" he remarked through his mother's cries. "You really have no choice. You have to let her go with me.

"The sooner you release her, the sooner I can free her from all this."

Over my dead body, Linden told his ambiguous smile and his bland eyes. Over my dead body.