

“The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”

Book Two

Fatal Revenant

Chapter Two: Difficult Answers

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How Stave accomplished what she had asked of him, Linden could not imagine. Yet when Mahrtiir led her at last past the switchbacks up through the long tunnel which opened onto the plateau above and behind Revelstone--when they finally left gloom and old emptiness behind, and crossed into sunshine under a deep sky stained only by Kevin's Dirt--she and the Manethrall were alone. The Humbled had not followed them. In spite of Stave's severance from his people, he had found some argument which had persuaded the Masters to leave her alone.

Here she could be free of their distrust; of denials that appalled her. Here she might be able to think.

Covenant and Jeremiah had been restored to her. And they would not allow her to touch them. They had been changed in some quintessential fashion which excluded her.

And Kevin's Dirt still exerted its baleful influence, slowly leeching away her health-sense and her courage--and she had been ordered not to use the Staff of Law. Both Covenant and her son had assured her that its power would undo the theurgy which enabled their presence. In dreams, Covenant's voice had told her, *You need the Staff of Law*. Through Anele, he had said, *You're the only one who can do this*. Yet now she was asked to believe that if she drew any hint of Earthpower from the warm wood, she would effectively erase Covenant and Jeremiah. The two people in all of life whom she had most yearned to see--to have and hold--would vanish.

She believed them, both of them. She did not know whether or not they had told the truth: she believed them nonetheless. They were Thomas Covenant and Jeremiah, her son. She could not do otherwise.

She had repeatedly insisted that she could not be compared to the Land's true heroes; and now the greatest of them had come.

And he had asked the Masters to keep her away from him until he was ready to talk. *I'm too tired*-- But she did not protest. While she could still think and choose--while she could still determine her own actions--she meant to make use of the time.

While Mahrtiir had guided her up through the Keep, she had resolved to find some *answers*.

She was on her way to Glimmermere because she had once been there with Thomas Covenant: a brief time of unconstrained love after the defeat of the na-Mhoram and the quenching of the Banefire. She hoped to recapture at the eldritch lake some sense of what she and Covenant had meant to each other; of who she was. But now she had another purpose as well. The strange potency of Glimmermere's waters might give her the power to be heard--

With Mahrtiir beside her and the Staff hugged in her arms, she walked steadily--grim and dry-eyed, as though she were not weeping inside--out of Revelstone onto the low upland hills which rumbled the plateau between Lord's Keep and the jagged pinnacles of the Westron Mountains.

Here she could see the handiwork of Sunder and Hollian, who had accepted the

stewardship of the Land thirty-five centuries ago. When she had walked into these hills with Thomas Covenant, the Sunbane had still ruled the Upper Land; and a desert sun had destroyed every vestige of vegetation. She and Covenant had crossed hard dirt and bare stone baked by the arid unnatural heat of the sun's corona. But now--

Ah, now there was thick grass underfoot, abundant forage for herds of cattle and sheep. With her health-sense, she could see that the gentler slopes ahead of her were arable. Revelstone was nearly empty, and its comparatively few inhabitants were easily fed by the fields to the north of the watchtower. At need, however, crops could be planted here to support a much larger population. And there were trees-- God, there were *trees*. Rich stands of pine and cedar accumulated off to her right until they grew so thickly that they obscured her view of the mountains in that direction. And ahead of her clumps of delicate mimosa and arching jacaranda punctuated the hillsides until the slow rise and fall of the slopes seemed as articulate as language. Everywhere spring gave the air a tang which made all of the colors more vibrant and filled each scent with burgeoning.

Under the Sunbane's bitter curse, she had seen nothing here that was not rife with pain-- until she and Covenant had reached the mystic lake which formed the headwater of the White River. Now everywhere she looked, both westward and around the curve of the sheer cliffs toward the north, the plateau had been restored to health and fertility. Somehow Linden's long-dead friends had taught themselves how to wield both Earthpower and Law. While they lived, Sunder and Hollian had made luxuriant and condign use of the Staff. The beauty which greeted Linden's sore heart above and behind Lord's Keep was one result of their labors.

Poor Anele, she thought as she walked toward the first trees. It was no wonder that his parents had filled him with astonishment; or that he had been daunted. Throughout their long lives, he had known the harsh aftereffects of the Sunbane--and had seen those enduring blights transformed to health. In his place, Linden, too, might have felt overwhelmed by their example.

Yet neither Anele nor the restoration of these hills dominated her thoughts. At her side, the Manethrall lost some of his severity as he regained the wide sky and the kindly hills; but if he had spoken to her, she might not have heard him. While she walked, the prospect of Glimmermere filled her with memories of Thomas Covenant.

When the threat of the Banefire had been extinguished, she had joined him in the private chambers which had once been High Lord Mhoram's home. At that time, she had feared that he would reject her; scorn her love. Earlier his intention to enter alone and undefended into the inferno of the Clave's evil had appalled her, and she tried to stop him by violating his mind, *possessing* him. That expression of her own capacity for evil might have destroyed the bond between them. Yet when they were alone at last, she had learned that he held nothing against her; that he forgave her effortlessly. And then he had taken her to Glimmermere, where the lake had helped her to forgive herself.

She wanted to hold onto that memory until she reached the upland tarn and could endeavor once again to wash away her dismay.

Don't touch him! Don't touch either of us!

She had risked the destruction of the world in order to retrieve the Staff of Law so that she might have some chance to redeem her son; yet both Jeremiah and Covenant had appeared through no act or decision or hazard of hers. For years and *years* she had striven to free Jeremiah from the chains of his peculiar dissociative disorder; yet he had reclaimed his mind in her absence, while Lord Foul tormented him. She had used all of her will and insight in an attempt to sway the Masters, and had won only Anele's freedom and Stave's friendship--at the

cost of Stave's violent expulsion from the communion of his people. And she had brought the Demondim to this time, recklessly, when Revelstone had no defense.

Like Kevin's Dirt, shame threatened to drain her until she was too weak to bear the cost of her life. Without the Staff's fire to sustain her, she clung to her best memories of Covenant's love--and to the possibilities of Glimmermere--so that she would not be driven to her knees by the weight of her mistakes and failures.

But those memories brought others. Alone with her, Covenant had spoken of the time when he had been the helpless prisoner of Kasreyn of the Gyre in *Bhrathairealm*. There the thaumaturge had described the value and power of white gold; of the same ring which now hung uselessly on its chain around her neck. *In a flawed world, Kasreyn had informed Covenant, purity cannot endure. Thus within each of my works I must perforce place one small flaw, else there would be no work at all.* But white gold was an alloy; inherently impure. *Its imperfection is the very paradox of which the Earth is made, and with it a master may form perfect works and fear nothing.*

The flaw in Kasreyn's works had permitted the Sandgorgon Nom to escape the prison of Sandgorgons Doom. Without it, Covenant, Linden, and the remnants of the Search might not have been able to breach Revelstone in order to defeat the Clave and quench the Banefire. But that was not the point which Covenant had wished Linden to grasp. Long centuries earlier, his friend Mhoram had told him, *You are the white gold.* And in the Banefire, Covenant himself had become a kind of alloy, an admixture of wild magic and the Despiser's venom; capable of perfect power.

At the time, he had wanted Linden to understand why he would never again use his ring. He had become too dangerous: he was human and did not trust himself to achieve any perfection except ruin. With his own strict form of gentleness, he had tried to prepare her for his eventual surrender to Lord Foul.

But now she thought that perhaps his words three and a half thousand years ago explained his unexpected appearance here. He had been transformed in death: Lord Foul had burned away the venom, leaving Covenant's spirit purified. As a result, he may have become a kind of perfect being--

--who could wield wild magic *and fear nothing.*

If that were true, he had come to retrieve his ring. He would need the instrument of his power in order to transcend the strictures imposed on him by his participation in the Arch of Time. Without his ring, he would only be capable of what he called *tricks.*

But why, then--? Linden's heart stumbled in pain. Why did he and Jeremiah refuse her touch?

She believed that she understood why her Staff threatened them. If Covenant had indeed *folded time*, he could only have done so by distorting the fundamental necessities of sequence and causality; the linear continuity of existence. Therefore the force of her Staff would be inherently inimical to his presence, and to Jeremiah's. It would reaffirm the Law which he had transgressed. He and Jeremiah might well disappear back into their proper dimensions of reality.

But how could her touch harm him, or her son? Apart from her Staff, she had no power except his wedding band.

If he wanted his ring back, why did he require her to keep her distance?

She groaned inwardly. She could not guess her way to the truth: she needed answers that she could not imagine for herself. As she and the Manethrall gradually turned their steps northwestward with the potential graze lands and fields of the lowest hillsides on their left and

the gathering stands of evergreen on their right, she spoke to him for the first time since they had left the forehall.

“Could you see them?” she asked without preamble. “Covenant and my son? Is there anything that you can tell me about them?”

For some reason, Anele had seemed unaware of their presence.

Mahrtiir did not hesitate. “The sight of the sleepless ones is not keener than ours,” he avowed, “though we cannot resist the diminishment of Kevin’s Dirt.” Scowling, he glanced skyward. “Yet the Unbeliever and your child are closed to us. I can descry nothing which you have not yourself beheld.”

“Then what do you think I should do?” Linden did not expect guidance from him. She merely wished to hear the sound of his voice amid the distant calling of birds and the low rustle of the trees. “How can I uncover the truth?”

Just be wary of me.

She needed something akin to the fierce simplicity with which Mahrtiir appeared to regard the world.

He bared his teeth in a smile like a blade. “Ringthane, you may be surprised to hear that I urge caution. Already I have dared a Fall--aye, and ridden the great stallion Narunal--in your name. Nor would I falter at still greater hazards. Yet I dislike any violation of Law. I was the first to speak against Esmer’s acceptance by the Ramen, and the last to grant my trust. Nor does it now console me that he has justified my doubts. I judge that I did wrongly to turn aside from them.

“The Unbeliever and his companion disturb me, though I cannot name my concern. Their seeming is substantial, yet mayhap they are in truth spectres. These matters are beyond my ken. I am able to counsel only that you make no determination in haste.”

The Manethrall paused for a long moment, apparently indecisive; and Linden wondered at the emotion rising in him. As they passed between mimosas toward the steeper hills surrounding Glimmermere, he cleared his throat to say more.

“But know this, Linden Avery, and be certain of it. I speak for the Ramen, as for the Cords in my care. We stand with you. The Ranyhyn have declared their service. Stave of the *Haruchai* has done so. I also would make my meaning plain.

“It appears that the Unbeliever has come among us, he who was once the Ringthane, and who twice accomplished Fangthane’s defeat, if the tales of him are sooth. Doubtless his coming holds vast import, and naught now remains as it was.” Mahrtiir’s tone hinted at battle as he pronounced, “Yet the Ramen stand with you. We cannot do less than the Ranyhyn have done. To him they reared when he was the Ringthane, but to you they gave unprecedented homage, bowing their heads. And they are entirely true. If you see peril in the Unbeliever’s presence, then we will oppose it at your side. Come good or ill, boon or bane, we stand with you.”

Then the Manethrall shrugged, and his manner softened. “Doubtless Liand will do the same. For the Demondim-spawn, either Waynhim or ur-vile, I cannot speak. But I have no fear that Stave will be swayed by the Unbeliever. He has withstood the judgment of the sleepless ones, and will no longer doubt you. And Anele must cling to the holder of the Staff. He cannot do otherwise.”

Mahrtiir faced her with reassurance in his eyes. “When you are summoned before the Unbeliever, consider that you are not alone. We who have elected to serve you will abide the outcome of your choices, and call ourselves fortunate to do so.”

I seek a tale which will remain in the memories of the Ramen when my life has ended.

Under other circumstances, Linden might have been moved by his declaration. But she was too full of doubt; of thwarted joy and unexplained bereavement. Instead of thanking him, she said gruffly, "It isn't like that. I'm not going to oppose him." Them. "I can't. He's Thomas Covenant.

"I just don't understand."

Then she looked away; quickened her pace without realizing it. Her impatience for the cleansing embrace of Glimmermere was growing. And her dilemma ran deeper than the Manethrall seemed to realize.

If both Covenant and Jeremiah were here--and they indeed had *something wrong* with them--she could imagine conditions under which she might be forced to choose between them. To fight for one at the expense of the other.

If that happened, she would cling to Jeremiah, and let Thomas Covenant go. She had spent ten years learning to accept Covenant's death--and eight of those years devoting herself to her son. Her first loyalty was to Jeremiah. Even if Covenant truly knew how to save the Land--

The Mahdoubt had warned her to *Be cautious of love*.

God, she did not simply need answers. She needed to wash out her mind. *Just be wary of me. Remember that I'm dead*. She had been given too many warnings; and she comprehended none of them.

Fortunately the high hills which cupped Glimmermere's numinous waters were rising before her. She could not yet catch the scent of their magic: the mild spring breeze carried it past the hilltops. And the lake itself was hidden from sight and sound on all sides except directly southward, where the White River began its run toward Furl Falls. Nevertheless she knew where she was. She could not forget the last place where she and Covenant had known simple happiness.

She wanted to run now, in spite of the ascent, but she forced herself to stop at the base of the slope. Turning to Mahrtiir, she asked, "You've been here already, haven't you?" He and his Cords had spent the previous afternoon and night among these hills with the Ranyhyn. "You've seen Glimmermere?"

She expected a prompt affirmative; but the Manethrall replied brusquely, "Ringthane, I have not. By old tales, I know of the mystic waters. But my Cords and I came to these hills to care for the Ranyhyn--and also," he admitted, "to escape the oppression of Revelstone and Masters. Our hearts were not fixed on tales.

"However, the Ranyhyn parted from us when we had gained the open sky. Galloping and glad, they scattered to seek their own desires. Therefore we tended to our refreshment with *alianta* and rest, awaiting your summons. We did not venture toward storied Glimmermere."

In spite of her haste, Linden felt a twist of regret on his behalf. "Why not?"

"We are Ramen," he said as if his reasons were self-evident. "We serve the Ranyhyn. That suffices for us. We do not presume to intrude upon other mysteries. No Raman has beheld the tarn of the horserite, yet we feel neither regret nor loss. We are content to be who we are. Lacking any clear cause to approach Glimmermere, I deemed it unseemly to distance ourselves from Revelstone and your uncertain plight."

She sighed. Now she understood the blind distress of Mahrtiir and his Cords when she had met them in the Close. But she had scant regard to spare for the Manethrall's strict pride. Her own needs were too great.

"All right," she murmured. "Don't worry about it.

"I'm going on ahead. I want you to stay here. I need to be alone for a while. If the

Masters change their minds--if the Humbled decide that they have to know what I'm doing--try to warn me." Glimmermere's potency might muffle her perception of anything else. "When I come back, we'll talk about this again.

"I think that you'll want to see the lake for yourself."

She held his gaze until he nodded. Then she turned to stride up the hillside without him.

Almost at once, he seemed to fall out of her awareness. Her memories of Covenant and Glimmermere sang to her, dismissing other considerations. At one time, she had been loved here. That experience, and others like it, had taught her how to love her son. She needed to immerse herself in Earthpower and clarity; needed to recover her sense of her own identity. Then she could try to make herself heard; heeded.

She was breathing hard--and entirely unconscious of it--as she passed the crest of the hill and caught sight of the lake where Thomas Covenant had given her a taste of joy; perhaps the first joy that she had ever known.

In one sense, Glimmermere was exactly as she remembered it. The lake was not large: from its edge, she might have been able to throw a stone across it. On all sides except its outlet to the south, it was concealed by hills as though the earth of the plateau had cupped its hands in order to isolate and preserve its treasure. And no streams flowed into it. Even the mighty heads of the Westron Mountains, now no more than a league distant, sent their rivers of rainfall and snow-melt down into the Land by other routes. Instead Glimmermere was fed by hidden springs arising as if in secret from the deep gutrock of the Land.

The surface of the water also was as Linden remembered it: as calm and pure as a mirror, reflecting the hills and the measureless sky perfectly; oblivious to distress. Yet she had not been here for ten long years, and she found now that her human memory had failed to retain the lake's full vitality, its untrammelled and untarnishable lucid purity. Remembering Glimmermere without percipience to refresh her recall, she had been unable to preserve its image undimmed. Now she was shocked almost breathless by the crystalline abundance and promise of the waters.

Taken by the sight, she began to jog down the hillside. She knew how cold the water would be: she had been chilled to the core when Covenant had called her into the lake. And now there was no desert sun to warm her when she emerged. But she also knew that the cold was an inherent aspect of Glimmermere's power to cleanse; and she did not hesitate. Covenant and Jeremiah had been returned to her, but she no longer knew them--or herself. When she reached the edge of the lake, she dropped the Staff of Law unceremoniously to the grass; tugged off her boots and socks, and flung them aside; stripped away her grass-stained pants as well as her shirt as if by that means she could remove her mortality; and plunged headlong into the tonic sting of memory and Earthpower.

In the instant of her dive, she saw that she cast no reflection on the water. Nothing of her interrupted Glimmermere's reiteration of its protective hills and the overarching heavens. The clustered rocks around the deep shadow of the lake's bottom looked sharp and near enough to break her as soon as she struck the surface. But she knew that she was not in danger. She remembered well that Glimmermere's sides were almost sheer, and its depths were unfathomable.

Then she went down into a fiery cold so fierce that it seemed to envelop her in liquid flame.

That, too, was as she remembered it: inextricable from her happiness with Covenant; whetted with hope. Nevertheless its incandescence drove the breath from her lungs. Before she could name her hope, or seek for it, she was forced gasping to the surface.

For a brief time, no more than a handful of heartbeats, she splashed and twisted as if she were dancing. But she was too human to remain in the lake: not alone, while Covenant's recalled love ached within her. Scant moments after she found air, she swam to the water's edge and pulled herself naked up onto the steep grass. There she rested in spite of the wet cold and the chill of spring, giving herself time to absorb, to recognize, Glimmermere's effects.

Closing her eyes, she used every other aspect of her senses to estimate what had become of her.

The waters healed bruises: they washed away the strain and sorrow of battle. She needed that. They could not undo the emotional cost of the things which she had suffered, but they lifted from her the long physical weariness and privation of recent days, the visceral residue of her passage through *caesures*, the tangible galls of her fraught yearning for her son. The eldritch implications of Glimmermere renewed her bodily health and strength as though she had feasted on *aliantha*.

As cold as the water, Covenant's ring burned between her breasts.

But the lake did more. The renewed accuracy with which she was able to perceive her own condition told her that the stain of Kevin's Dirt had been scrubbed from her senses. And when she reached beyond herself, she felt the ramified richness of the grass beneath her, the imponderable life-pulse of the undergirding soil and stone. She could not detect Mahrtiir's presence beyond the hills: his emanations were too mortal to penetrate Glimmermere's glory. Yet spring's fecundity whispered to her along the gentle breeze, and the faint calling of the birds was as eloquent as melody. The wealth of the lake was now a paean, a sun-burnished outpouring of the Earth's essential gladness, as lambent as Earthpower, and as celebratory as an aubade.

In other ways, nothing had changed. Her torn heart could not be healed by any expression of this world's fundamental bounty. Covenant and Jeremiah had been restored to her—and they would not let her touch them. That hurt remained. Glimmermere held no anodyne for the dismay and bereavement which had brought her here.

Nevertheless the lake had given her its gifts. It had made her stronger, allowing her to feel capable again; more certain of herself. And it had erased the effects of Kevin's Dirt, when she had been forbidden to do so with the Staff of Law.

She was as ready as she would ever be.

Steady now, and moving without haste, she donned her clothes and boots; retrieved her Staff. Then she climbed a short way up the hillside, back toward Revelstone, until she found a spot where the slope offered a stretch of more level ground. There she planted her feet as though her memories of Thomas Covenant and love stood at her back to support her. Facing southward across the hillside, she braced the Staff in the grass at her feet and gripped it with one hand while she lifted the white gold ring from under her damp shirt with the other and closed it in her fist.

She took a deep breath; held it for a moment, preparing herself. Then she lifted her face to the sky.

She had ascended far enough to gain a clear view of the mountainheads in the west. Clouds had begun to thicken behind the peaks, suggesting the possibility of rain. It would not come soon, however. The raw crests still clawed the clouds to high wisps and feathers that streamed eastward like fluttering pennons. As Glimmermere's waters flowed between the hills into the south, they caught the sunshine and glistened like a spill of gems.

Now, she thought. Now or never.

With her head held high, she announced softly, "It's time, Esmer. You've done enough harm. It's time to do some good."

“I need answers, and I don’t know anyone else who can give them to me.”

Her voice seemed to fall, unheard, to the grass. Nothing replied to her except birdsong and the quiet incantations of the breeze.

More loudly, she continued, “Come on, Esmer. I know you can hear me. You said that the Despiser is hidden from you, and you can’t tell me where to find my son, but those seem to be the *only* things that you don’t know. There’s too much going on, and all of it matters too much. It’s time to pick a side. I need *answers*.”

Still she had no reason to believe that he would heed her. She had no idea what his true powers were, or how far they extended. She could not even be sure that he had returned to her present. He may have sought to avoid the pain of his conflicting purposes by remaining in the Land’s past; in a time when he could no longer serve either Cail’s devotion or Kastenessen’s loathing.

Hell, as far as she knew, he had arrived to aid and betray her outside the cave of the Waynhim before his own birth. And he had certainly brought the Demondim forward from an age far older than himself. But his strange ability to go wherever and whenever he willed reassured her obliquely. It was another sign that the Law of Time retained its integrity.

No matter which era of the Earth Esmer chose to occupy, his life and experience remained consecutive, as hers did. His betrayal of her, and of the Waynhim, in the Land’s past had been predicated on his encounters with her among the Ramen only a few days ago. If he came to her now, in his own life he would do so after he had brought the Demondim to assail her small company. The Law of Time required that, despite the harm which Joan had wrought with wild magic.

Even if he did hear her, however, he had given her no cause to believe that he could be summoned. He was descended--albeit indirectly--from the *Elohim*; and those self-absorbed beings ignored all concerns but their own. Linden was still vaguely surprised that they had troubled to send warning of the Land’s peril.

Nevertheless Esmer’s desire to assist her had seemed as strong as his impulse toward treachery. The commitments that he had inherited from Cail matched the dark desires of the *merewives*.

He might yet come to her.

She was not willing to risk banishing Covenant and Jeremiah with the Staff. And she was not desperate enough to chance wild magic. But she had found her own strength in Glimmermere. She had felt its cold in the marrow of her bones. When a score of heartbeats had passed, and her call had not been answered, she raised her voice to a shout.

“Esmer, God *damn* it! I’m keeping score here, and by my count you still *owe* me!” Even his riven heart could not equate unleashing the Demondim--and the Illearth Stone--with serving as a translator for the Waynhim. “Cail was your *father*! You can’t deny that. You’ll tear yourself apart. And the Ranyhyn trust me! You love them, I *know* you do. For their sake, if not for simple fairness--!”

Abruptly she stopped. She had said enough. Lowering her head, she sagged as if she had been holding her breath.

Without transition, nausea began squirming in her guts.

She knew that sensation; had already become intimately familiar with it. If she reached for wild magic now, she would not find it: its hidden place within her had been sealed away.

She felt no surprise at all as Esmer stepped out of the sunlight directly in front of her.

He was unchanged; was perhaps incapable of change. If she had glimpsed him from a

distance, only his strange apparel would have prevented her from mistaking him for one of the *Haruchai*. He had the strong frame of Stave's kinsmen, the brown skin, the flattened features untouched by time. However, his gilded cymar marked him as a being apart. Its ecru fabric might have been woven from the foam of running seas, or from the clouds that fled before a thunderstorm, and its gilding was like fine streaks of light from a setting sun.

But he stood only a few steps away; and at this distance, his resemblance to his father vanished behind the dangerous green of his eyes and the nausea he evoked as though it were an essential aspect of his nature. His emanations were more subtle than those of the Demondim, yet in his own way he seemed more potent and ominous than any of the Vile-spawn.

By theurgy if not by blood, he was Kastenessen's grandson.

For a moment, nausea and perceptions of might dominated Linden's attention. Then, belatedly, she saw that he was not alone.

A band of ur-viles had appeared perhaps a dozen paces behind him: more ur-viles than she had known still existed in the world; far more than had enabled her to retrieve the Staff of Law. Only six or seven of those creatures had lived to reach the ambiguous sanctuary of Revelstone and the plateau. Yet here she saw at least three score of the black Demondim-spawn; perhaps as many as four. None of them bore any sign that they had endured a desperate struggle for their lives, and hers.

And on either side of the ur-viles waited small groups of Waynhim. The grey servants of the Land numbered only half as many as the ur-viles; yet even they were more than the mere dozen or so that had accompanied her to Lord's Keep. Like the ur-viles, they showed no evidence that they had been in a battle.

What--? Involuntarily Linden took a startled step backward. Esmer--?

Millennia ago, he had brought the Demondim out of the Land's ancient past to assail her.

In alarm, she threw a glance around the surrounding hills--and found more creatures behind her. These, however, she recognized: twelve or fourteen Waynhim and half that many ur-viles, most of the them scarred by the nacre acid of the Demondim, or by the cruel virulence of the Illearth Stone. They had formed separate wedges to concentrate their strength. And both formations were aimed at Esmer. The battered loremaster of the ur-viles pointed its iron jerrid or scepter like a warning at Cail's son.

Esmer, what have you *done*?

Where else could he have found so many ur-viles, so many Waynhim, if not in a time before she and Covenant had faced the Sunbane? A time when the ur-viles had served Lord Foul, and the Waynhim had defended the Land, according to their separate interpretations of their Weird?

Instinctively Linden wanted to call up fire to protect herself. But the creatures at her back had supported her with their lives as well as their lore when no one else could have aided her. They intended to defend her now, although they were badly out-numbered. And the force of her Staff would harm them. For their sake--and because there were Waynhim among the ur-viles with Esmer--she fought down her fear.

As she mastered herself, all of the Demondim-spawn began to bark simultaneously.

Their raucous voices seemed to strike the birdsong from the air. Even the breeze was shocked to stillness. Guttural protests as harsh as curses broke over her head like a prolonged crash of surf. Yet among the newcomers appeared none of the steaming ruddy iron blades which the ur-viles used as weapons. None of them resembled a loremaster. And neither they nor the Waynhim with them stood in wedges to focus their power.

Then Linden understood that the newcomers did not mean to strike at her. They were not even prepared to ward themselves. Their voices sounded inherently hostile; feral as the baying of wild dogs. Nevertheless no power swelled among them. Their yells were indistinguishable from those of her allies.

And Esmer himself sneered openly at her apprehension. A sour grin twisted his mouth: the baleful green of disdain filled his gaze.

“God in Heaven,” Linden muttered under her breath. Trembling, she forced herself to loosen her grip on the Staff; drop Covenant’s ring back under her shirt. Then she met Esmer’s eyes as squarely as she could.

“So which is it this time?” She almost had to shout to make herself heard. Aid and betrayal. “I’ve never seen so many--“

She was familiar with Esmer’s inbred rage at the *Haruchai*. He had nearly killed Stave with it. If Hyn’s arrival, and Hynyn’s, had not stayed his hand--

Because of the Haruchai, there will be endless havoc!

The Masters would not expect an assault from the direction of the plateau.

If the Waynhim condoned--or at least tolerated--the presence of the ur-viles, she could be sure that she was not in danger. Perhaps the Masters and Revelstone were also safe. Yet she could not imagine any explanation for Esmer’s actions except treachery.

Fervently she hoped that Mahrtiir would not rush to her aid. She trusted him; but his presence would complicate her confrontation with Esmer.

However, Kevin’s Dirt had blunted the Manethrall’s senses. And the Demondim-spawn were able to disguise their presence. If the shape of the hills contained the clamor--or if the sound of the river muffled it--he might be unaware of what transpired.

“‘Keeping score’?” replied Esmer sardonically. “‘Count’? Such speech is unfamiliar to me. Nonetheless your meaning is plain. In the scales of your eyes, if by no other measure, my betrayals have outweighed my aid. You are ignorant of many things, Wildwielder. Were your misjudgments not cause for scorn, they would distress me.”

She had often seen him look distressed when he spoke to her.

“Stop it, Esmer,” she ordered flatly. “I’m tired of hearing you avoid simple honesty.” And she was painfully aware of her ignorance. “I called you because I need *answers*. You can start with the question I just asked. Why are these creatures here?”

A flicker that might have been uncertainty or glee disturbed the flowing disdain in his eyes. “And do you truly conceive that I have come in response to your summons? Do you imagine that you are in any fashion capable of commanding me?”

Around Linden, the ur-viles and Waynhim yowled and snarled like wolves contending over a carcass. She could hardly recognize her own thoughts. As if to ready a threat of her own, she clenched her fists. “I said, *stop* it.”

She wanted to be furious at him. Ire would have made her stronger. But her writhen nausea described his underlying plight explicitly. He could not reconcile his conflicting legacies, and behind his disdain was a rending anguish.

More in exasperation than anger, she continued, “I don’t care whether I actually summoned you or not. If you aren’t going to answer my questions,” if he himself did not constitute an answer, “go away. Let your new allies do whatever they came to do.”

Neither Esmer’s expression nor his manner changed. In the same mordant tone, he responded, “There speaks more ignorance, Wildwielder. These makings are not my ‘allies’. Indeed, their mistrust toward me far surpasses your own.”

He heaved a sarcastic sigh. “You have heard me account for my actions, and for those of the ur-viles and Waynhim as well. Still you do not comprehend. I have not garnered these surviving remnants of their kind from the abyss of time in order to serve me. Nor would they accept such service for any cause. I have enabled their presence here, and they have accepted it, so that they may serve you.”

“*Serve me?*” Linden wanted to plead with the Demondim-spawn to lower their voices. Their shouting forced her to bark as roughly as they did. “How?”

Did they believe that less than a hundred Waynhim and ur-viles would suffice to drive back the Demondim? When that horde could draw upon the immeasurable bane of the Illearth Stone?

“Wildwielder,” Esmer rasped, “it is my wish to speak truly. Yet I fear that no truth will content you.

“Would it suffice to inform you, as I have done before, that these creatures perceive the peril of my nature, and are joined in their wish to guard against me? Would it appease you to hear that they now know their kindred accompanying you have discovered a purpose worthy of *devoir*, and that therefore they also desire to stand with you?”

“Oh, I can believe that,” she retorted. The ur-viles at her back had already shown more selfless devotion than she would have believed possible from the Despiser’s former vassals. The Waynhim had demonstrated that they were willing to unite with their ancient enemies for her sake. And none of the creatures on the hillside had raised anything more than their voices against each other. “But you’re right. I’m not ‘content.’

“Why did you bring them here? What do you gain? Is this something that Cail would have done, or are you listening to Kastenessen?”

In response, a brief flinch marred Esmer’s disdain. For an instant, he gave her the impression that he was engaged in a fierce battle with himself. Then he resumed his scorn.

God, she wished that the Demondim-spawn would *shut up*--

“It is your assertion that I am in your debt,” Esmer said as if he were jeering. “I concur. Therefore I have gathered these makings from the past, for their kind has perished, and no others exist in this time. They retain much of the dark lore of the Demondim. They will ward you, and this place”--he nodded in the direction of Revelstone--“with more fidelity than the *Haruchai*, who have no hearts.”

Covenant had said that he did not expect the horde to attack for another day or two. Could so many ur-viles and Waynhim working together contrive a viable defense? If she ended the threat of the Illearth Stone?

She had already made her decision about the Stone. Its powers were too enormous and fatal: she could not permit them to be unleashed. Nonetheless she shook her head as though Esmer had not affected her.

“That tells me what they can do,” she replied through the tumult of barking. “It doesn’t tell me why you brought them here. With you, everything turns into a betrayal somehow. What kind of harm do you have in mind this time?”

He gave her another exaggerated sigh. “Wildwielder, it is thoughtless to accuse me thus. You have been informed that ‘Good cannot be accomplished by evil means,’ yet you have not allowed the ill of your own deeds to dissuade you from them. Am I not similarly justified in all that I attempt? Why then do you presume to weigh my deeds in a more exacting scale?”

Linden was acutely aware that the “means” by which she had reached her present position were questionable at best: at worst, they had been actively hurtful. She had used Anele

as if he were a tool; had violated Stave's pride by healing him; had endangered the Arch of Time simply to increase her chances of finding her son. But she did not intend to let Esmer deflect her.

She met his disdain with the fierceness of Glimmermere's cold and strength. "All right," she returned without hesitation. "We're both judged by what we do. I accept that. But I take risks and make mistakes because I know what I want, not because I can't choose between help and hurt. If you want me to believe you, answer a straight question."

She needed anything that he could reveal about Covenant and Jeremiah; needed it urgently. But first she had to break down his scorn. It protected his strange array of vulnerabilities. He would continue to evade her until she found a way to touch his complex pain.

"You don't want to talk about you've just done," she said between her teeth. "That's pretty obvious. Tell me this instead.

"Who possessed Anele in the Verge of Wandering? Who used him to talk to the Demondim? Who filled him with all of that fire? Give me a name."

Covenant and Jeremiah had been *herded*-- If she knew who wished them to reach her, she might begin to grasp the significance of their arrival.

The abrupt silence of the Waynhim and ur-viles seemed to suck the air from her lungs: it nearly left her gasping. Their raucous clamor was cut off as if they were appalled. Or as if--

Trying to breathe again, she swallowed convulsively.

--as if she had finally asked a question that compelled their attention.

Now Esmer did not merely flinch. He almost appeared to cower. In an instant, all of his hauteur fled. Instead of sneering, he ducked his head to escape her gaze. His cymar fluttered about him, independent of the breeze, so that its sunset gilding covered him in disturbed streaks and consternation.

Together all of the Demondim-spawn, those behind him as well as those with Linden, advanced a few steps, tightening their cordon around Esmer and her. Their wide nostrils tasted the air wetly, as though they sought to detect the scent of truth; and their ears twitched avidly.

When Esmer replied, his voice would have been inaudible without the silence.

"You speak of Kastenessen." He may have feared being overheard. "I have named him my grandsire, though the Dancers of the Sea were no get of his. Yet they were formed by the lore and theurgy which he gifted to the mortal woman whom he loved. Therefore I am the descendant of his power. Among the *Elohim*, no other form of procreation has meaning."

The ur-viles and Waynhim responded with a low mutter which may have expressed approval or disbelief. Like them, if in an entirely different fashion, the *merewives* were artificial beings, born of magic and knowledge rather than of natural flesh.

Kastenessen, Linden thought. New fears shook her. She believed Esmer instinctively. Kastenessen had burned her with his fury in the open center of the Verge of Wandering. And yesterday he had influenced the Demondim, persuading them to alter their intentions.

"That's why you serve him," she murmured unsteadily. *I serve him utterly.* "You inherited your power from him."

His power--and his hunger for destruction.

"As I also serve you," he told her for the second time.

Kastenessen. The name was a knell; a funereal gong adumbrating echoes in all directions. Her nausea was growing worse. The *Elohim* had forcibly Appointed Kastenessen to prevent or imprison a peril *in the farthest north of the world*. But now he had broken free of his Durance. When Lord Foul had said, *I have merely whispered a word of counsel here and there,*

and awaited events, he may have been speaking of Kastenessen.

She knew how powerful the *Elohim* could be, any of them--

Kastenessen had provided for her escape from the horde. Had he also enabled Covenant and Jeremiah to reach her? Did he want all three of them alive?

Still scrambling to catch up with the implications of Esmer's revelation, she mused aloud, "So when Anele talks about *skurj*--"

"He names the beasts"--Esmer shook his head--"nay, the monstrous creatures of fire which Kastenessen was Appointed to contain. They come to assail the Land because he has severed or eluded the Durance which compelled him to his doom."

Behind the Mithil's Plunge, Anele had referred to Kastenessen. *I could have preserved the Durance!* he had cried. *Stopped the skurj. With the Staff! If I had been worthy.*

Did you sojourn under the Sunbane with Sunder and Hollian, and learn nothing of ruin?

According to Anele--or to the native stone that he had touched behind the Plunge--the *Elohim* had done nothing to secure Kastenessen's imprisonment.

Aching for Anele's pain, and for her own peril, Linden asked Esmer softly, "What about this morning? The Demondim *let* Covenant and my son reach Revelstone." Covenant had given her an explanation. She wanted to know if he had told the truth. "Was that Kastenessen's doing too?"

"You do not comprehend," Esmer protested dolefully; as regret-ridden as the wind that drove seafarers into the Soulbiter. "Your ignorance precludes it. Do you not know that the Viles, those beings of terrible and matchless lore, were once a lofty and admirable race? Though they roamed the Land widely, they inhabited the Lost Deep in caverns as ornate and majestic as castles. There they devoted their vast power and knowledge to the making of beauty and wonder, and all of their works were filled with loveliness. For an age of the Earth, they spurned the heinous evils buried among the roots of Gravin Threndor, and even in the time of Berek Lord-Fatherer no ill was known of them."

Esmer's ambiguous conflicts had grown so loud that Linden could not shut them out. They hurt her nerves like the carnage before Revelstone's gates, when the Demondim had slaughtered so many Masters and their mounts.

She had asked about Kastenessen--about Covenant--and Esmer talked of Viles.

"Yet a shadow had already fallen upon them," Cail's son continued, "like and unlike the shadow upon the hearts of the *Elohim*. The corruption of the Viles, and of their makings, the Demondim, transpired thus."

Wait, she wanted to insist. Stop. That isn't what I need to know. But the accentuation of Esmer's manner held her. He was right: her ignorance precluded her from asking the right questions--and from recognizing useful answers.

"Many tales are told," said Esmer, "some to conceal, some to reveal. Yet it is sooth that long before the Despiser's coming to the littoral of the Land, he had stretched out his hand to awaken the malevolence of Lifeswallower, the Great Swamp, as it lurked in the heart of Sarangrave Flat, for he delights in cruel hungers. And from that malevolence--conjoined with the rapacity of humankind--had emerged the three Ravers, *moksha*, *turiya*, and *samadhi*. By such means was the One Forest decimated, and its long sentience maimed, until an *Elohim* came to preserve its remnants.

"Awakened to themselves," Esmer explained as though the knowledge grieved him, "the trees created the Forestals to guard them, and bound the *Elohim* into the Colossus of the Fall as an Interdict against the Ravers, repulsing them from the Upper Land.

“Later the Despiser established Ridjeck Thome as his seat of power, though he did not then declare himself to human knowledge. There he gathered the Ravers to his service. And with his guidance, they together, or some among them, began cunningly to twist the hearts of the sovereign and isolate Viles. Forbidden by the Colossus, the Ravers could not enter the Lost Deep. Instead they met with Viles that roamed east of Landsdrop, exploring the many facets of the Land. With whispers and subtle blandishments, and by slow increments, the Ravers obliquely taught the Viles to loathe their own forms.

“Being Ravers, the brothers doubtless began by sharing their mistrust and contempt toward the surviving mind of the One Forest, and toward the Forestals. From that beginning, however, the Viles were readily led to despise themselves, for all contempt turns upon the contemptuous, as it must.”

Esmer had raised his head: he faced Linden as steadily as he could. But his eyes were the fraught hue of heavy seas crashing against each other, and his raiment gusted about him in the throes of a private storm.

“In that same age,” he went on, “as the perversion of the Viles progressed, *samadhi* Raver evaded the Interdict by passing beyond the Southron Range to taint the people who gave birth to Berek Lord-Fatherer. By his influence upon their King, *samadhi* instigated the war which led Berek through terrible years and cruel bloodshed to his place as the first High Lord in the Land.

“Among the crags of Mount Thunder, Berek had sworn himself to the service of the Land. But he was new to power, and much of his effort was turned to the discovering of the One Tree and the forming of the Staff of Law. He could not halt all of humankind’s depredations against the forests. And as the trees dwindled, so the strength of the Colossus was diminished.

“Nonetheless in the time of High Lord Damelon the Interdict endured. When the Viles turned their lore and their self-loathing to the creation of the Demondim in the Lost Deep, the Ravers were precluded from interference.”

Esmer nodded as if to himself. His gaze drifted away from Linden. He may have been too absorbed in his tale, in rue and old bitterness, to remember that he was not answering her. Nevertheless the Waynhim and ur-viles heeded him in utter silence, as if their Weird hinged on his words. For their sake, and because she could not evaluate his reasons for speaking, she swallowed her impulse to interrupt him.

“And the Viles were too wise to labor foolishly, or in ignorance. They did not seek to renew their own loathing, but rather to render it impotent. Therefore the Demondim were spawned free of their creators’ stain. Though they lacked some portion of the Viles’ majesty and lore, they were not ruled by contempt. Instead they were a stern race, holding themselves apart from the Viles in renunciation.

“Yet across the years the Demondim also were turned to abhorrence. Dwelling apart from the Viles, they made their habitation in proximity to the Illearth Stone and other banes. And the evil within the Sarangrave called to them softly, as it had to the Viles. When at last the Demondim ventured to seek the source of that call, they entered the Lower Land and Sarangrave Flat, and there they met the fate of their makers, for the Ravers gained power over them also.”

Complex emotions seemed to tug like contrary winds at Esmer’s cymar, and his voice resembled the threat of thunder beyond the Westron Mountains. “*Moksha* Jehannum took possession of their loremaster, and *turiya* with him, luring the Vile-spawn to self-revulsion. Though the loremaster was later slain by the *krill* of Loric Vilesilencer, the harm was done. The Demondim also learned the loathing of trees, and so came to loathe themselves. Thus they met

the doom of their makers, and the labors which created the ur-viles and the Waynhim began.

“Unlike the Viles, however, the Demondim were seduced to the Despiser’s service. Their makers had created within them an aspect of mortality and dross, and they were unable to perceive that the Despiser’s scorn toward them exceeded their own. Nor was their desire to follow the dictates of their loathing restricted by the Interdict. They acted upon the Upper Land while the Ravers were hidden from the Council of Lords, and the Despiser himself remained unknown.

“Throughout the years of Loric Vilesilencer and High Lord Kevin, the Demondim pursued evil in the Land, until at last they participated in the treachery which broke Kevin Landwaster’s resolve and led him to the Ritual of Desecration. That the Demondim themselves would also perish in the Ritual, they could not foresee, for they did not comprehend the disdain of their master. Therefore they were unmade.”

The listening creatures had moved still closer. They seemed to hear Esmer with their nostrils as much as their ears. And as they approached, more and more of the Waynhim were mingled among the ur-viles. For the moment, at least, they had set aside their long enmity.

“For millennia thereafter,” Esmer sighed, “the ur-viles likewise served the Despiser and opposed the Lords, following in the steps of their makers, though the Waynhim chose another path. Yet the Demondim had accomplished both less and more than their purpose. The ur-viles and Waynhim were entirely enfleshed. For that reason, their blindness exceeded that of the Demondim--as did their inadvertent capacity for wisdom. Being imprisoned in mortality, they became heir to a power, or a need, which is inherent in all beings that think and may be slain. By their very nature, they were compelled to reconsider the significance of their lives. Flesh and death inspired the ur-viles and Waynhim to conceive differing Weirds to justify themselves--and to reinterpret their Weirds as they wished. In consequence, their allegiances were vulnerable to transmutation.”

Linden recognized aspects of truth in what he said, but that did nothing to relieve her distress. Her mouth was full of bile and illness, and she did not know how much longer she could contain her nausea. Esmer’s conflicts aggravated it. The Demondim-spawn may have understood his intent: she did not.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked abruptly. “It isn’t what I need. I have to know why the Demondim didn’t kill Jeremiah and Covenant. You said that Kastenessen convinced those monsters to let me escape. Did he do the same for my son and Covenant?”

A flare of anger like a glimpse of the Illearth Stone showed in Esmer’s eyes. “And are you also ignorant,” he retorted, “that the *Cavewights* were once friendly to the people of the Land? I wish you to grasp the nature of such creatures. You inquire of Kastenessen, and I reply. That which appears evil need not have been so from the beginning, and need not remain so until the end.

“Doubtless your knowledge of Viles and Demondim and ur-viles has been gleaned from the *Haruchai*.” He had recovered his scorn. “Have they also informed you that when both the Viles and the Demondim had been undone, the ur-viles retained the lore of their making? Do you comprehend that the ur-viles continued to labor in the Lost Deep when all of their creators had passed away? Though the Waynhim did not arrogate such tasks to themselves, the ur-viles endeavored to fashion miracles of lore and foresight which would alter the fate of their kind, and of the Land, and of the very Earth.”

He had shaken Linden again. Holding the Staff in the crook of her arm, she pushed her fingers through the damp tangles of her hair: she wanted to push them through her thoughts in

an effort to straighten out the confusion of Esmer's indirect answers.

"Wait a minute," she protested with her hands full of uncertainty. "Stave said--"

He had said, *Much of the black lore of the Viles and the Demondim endured to them--and much did not. Both Waynhim and ur-viles continued to dwindle. They created no descendants, and when they were slain nothing returned of them.*

Esmer snorted. "The *Haruchai* speak of that which they know, which is little. The truth has been made plain to you, for you have known Vain. You cannot doubt that the ur-viles pursued the efforts of their makers.

"At the same time, however, more of these creatures"--he gestured around him--"came into being, both ur-viles and Waynhim. For that reason, I have been able to gather so many to your service."

Linden tried to interrupt him again; slow him down so that she could think. He over-rode her harshly. Twisted by the contradictory demands of his heritage, he may still have been trying to answer her original question.

"But the ur-viles have created other makings also. They did not cease their labors when they had formed Vain, for they were not content. Their reinterpretation of their Weird was not yet satisfied. Therefore they have made--"

Suddenly he stopped as if he had caught himself on the edge of a precipice. Chagrin darkened his gaze as he stared at her, apparently unable or unwilling to look away.

"Made what?" Linden breathed softly. His manner alarmed her.

The ur-viles and Waynhim crowded closer. Ripples of dark power ran among them as if they were sharing intimations of vitriol; nascent outrage.

Linden unclosed the Staff from the crook of her arm and wrapped both of her hands around it. She had too many fears: she could not allow them to daunt her. "Made what?" she repeated more strongly.

Esmer's green eyes seemed to spume with anger or dread as he pronounced hoarsely, "Manacles."

She gaped at him in surprise. What, *manacles*? *Fetters*?

"Why?" she demanded. "Who are they for?" Or what?

Which of the powers abroad in the Land did the ur-viles hope to imprison?

He shook his head. At the same time, the creatures started barking again, arguing incomprehensibly in their guttural tongue. Some of them made gestures that may have been threats or admonitions. Force rolled through them, small wavelets of energy like ripples spreading outward from the impact of their inhuman emotions; but they did not seek to concentrate it.

Linden wanted to cover her ears. "What are they saying?" Her voice held an involuntary note of pleading. "Esmer, tell me."

At once, the froth of waves seemed to fill his eyes, concealing their deeper hues. "They have heard me. They acknowledge my intent, though you do not. Now some debate the interpretation of their Weirds. Others demand that I explain their purpose further." He folded his arms like bands across his chest. "But I will not. The debt between us I have redeemed, and more. In this, there is no power sufficient to compel me."

Around him, the shouting of the creatures subsided to an angry mutter. Or perhaps their low sounds expressed resignation rather than ire.

Manacles--? In frustration, Linden wanted to hit him with the Staff. He still had not answered her question about his grandsire--or shed any light on the conundrum of Covenant and

Jeremiah.

Struggling to keep her balance amid a gyre of information and implications which she did not know how accommodate, she retreated to surer ground.

“All right. Forget the manacles. I don’t need to know.” Not now, when she had so many more immediate concerns. “Tell me something I can understand. How did you convince your ur-viles and Waynhim to come with you?” She knew why her own small band had combined their efforts against the Demondim. Even now, however, she could not be certain that the truce between them would hold. And those with Esmer had not shared in her battles. “They’ve been enemies for thousands of years. Why have they set that aside?”

Esmer raised one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. Closing his eyes, he massaged them briefly with his fingertips. As he did so, he replied in a tone of exaggerated patience, as if he had already answered her question in terms that even a child could comprehend.

“To the ur-viles, I offered opportunity to see fulfilled the mighty purpose which they began in the making of Vain. To the Waynhim, I promised a joining with their few kindred, that they might be powerful in the Land’s service.” Then he lowered his hand, letting her see the wind-tossed disturbance in his eyes. “And of both I required this covenant, that they must cease all warfare between them.”

As if in assent, the creatures fell silent again.

Before Linden could ask another question, Esmer added, “Wildwielder, you exhaust my restraint. You have demanded answers. I have provided them, seeking to relieve the darkness of my nature. But one of the *Haruchai* approaches from that place”--again he indicated Revelstone--“and I will not suffer his presence. I cannot. Already my heart frays within me. Soon it will demand release. If I do not depart, I will wreak--“

He stopped. His expression and his green eyes seemed to beseech her for forbearance.

But her nausea and distress were too great. Her son and Thomas Covenant had refused to let her hold them. They might as well have rejected her years of unfulfilled love. Instead of honoring Esmer’s appeal, she said grimly, “If you didn’t insist on doing harm, you wouldn’t need relief.”

For an instant, he looked so stricken that she thought he might weep. But then, as if by an act of will, he recovered his scorn. “If I did not insist upon aiding you,” he told her acidly, “I would not be required to commit harm.”

He had told her the history of the Viles and Demondim in order to justify himself: she believed that, although it may have been only part of the truth. He wanted her to trust that the creatures which he had brought forward from the past would serve her. At the same time, he was plainly trying to warn her--

But she could not afford to think about such things now. He was about to depart: she would not be able to stop him. And she still had learned nothing about Covenant and Jeremiah.

“All right,” she said again, trying to speak more quickly. “I accept your explanation. I accept”--she gestured around at the ur-viles and Waynhim--“all of them. You’re trying to help me, even though I don’t understand it. But I still need answers.

“You said that there’s a shadow on the hearts of the *Elohim*. What does that *mean*?” She meant, What does Kastenessen have to do with Covenant and my son? But Esmer had already evaded that question. “Why didn’t they stop Kastenessen from breaking free?”

Esmer groaned as if she endangered his sanity. Gritting his teeth, he said, “The *Elohim* believe that they are equal to all things. This is false. Were it true, the Earth entire would exist in their image, and they would have no need to fear the rousing of the Worm of the World’s End.

Nonetheless they persist in their belief. That is shadow enough to darken the heart of any being.

“They did not act to preserve Kastenessen’s Durance because they saw no need. Are you not the Wildwielder? And have you not returned to the Land? The *skurj* are mindless beasts, ravaging to feed. Kastenessen’s will rules them, but they cannot harm the *Elohim*. And you will oppose both Kastenessen and his monsters. What then remains to cause the *Elohim* concern? They have done that which they deem needful. They have forewarned the people of the Land, speaking often of the peril of the halfhand when the *Haruchai* have effaced any other knowledge or defense. Their Würd requires nothing more. While you endure, they fear no other threat.”

Linden flinched. She should have been prepared for Esmer’s assertion. Since their first meeting millennia ago, the *Elohim* had distrusted and disdained Thomas Covenant. They had been convinced even then that she, not Covenant, should be the one to hold and use white gold. And later, just a few days ago, Esmer had said, *You have become the Wildwielder, as the Elohim knew that you must.*

Nevertheless he filled her with dismay.

“Wait a minute,” she protested. “You have to tell me. What’s ‘the peril of the halfhand’? You can’t mean the Humbled. They don’t have any power--and they don’t *want* to threaten the Land. And you can’t mean my son. That poor boy has been Lord Foul’s prisoner ever since he came here. He doesn’t have a ring, or a staff, or lore.” He retained only his racecar, pitiable and useless. “He has power now, but he must be getting it from someone else.

“No.” She shook her head in denial. “You’re talking about Thomas Covenant. But how is *he* dangerous? My God, Esmer, he’s already saved the Land *twice*. And he’s probably been holding the Arch of Time together ever since Joan started her *caesures*. Why do the *Elohim* think that *anybody* has to *beware the halfhand*?”

“Wildwielder.” Esmer seemed to throw up his hands in disgust or apprehension. “Always you persist in questions which require no response, or which serve no purpose, or which will cause my destruction. You waste my assistance, when any attempt at aid or guidance is cruel to me. Do you mean to demand the entire knowledge of the Earth, while the Land itself is brought to ruin, and Time with it?”

“It’s not that simple!” she snapped urgently. “Practically everything is being hidden from me,” and not only by Cail’s son. “When I do learn something, it isn’t relevant to my problems. Even with the Staff, I might as well be blind.

“You’ve at least got *eyes*. You see things that I can’t live without. You’re in my debt. You said so. Maybe that’s why these ur-viles and Waynhim are here. Maybe it isn’t. But if I’m asking the wrong questions, whose fault is that? I’ve got nothing *but* questions. How am I supposed to know which are the right ones? How can I help *wasting* you when you won’t tell me what I need to know?”

Esmer’s sudden anguish was so acute that it seemed to splash against her skin like spray; and the doleful green of his gaze cried out to her. In response, her stomach twisted as though she had swallowed poison. Another mutter arose from the watching creatures, a sound as sharp as fangs. The air felt too thick to breathe: she had difficulty drawing it into her lungs.

As if the words were being wrung from him by the combined insistence of the Waynhim and ur-viles, he hissed, “You must be the first to drink of the EarthBlood.”

For a moment longer, he remained in front of her, letting her see that his distress was as poignant as a wail. Then he left.

She did not see him vanish. Instead he seemed to sink back like a receding wave until he was gone as if he had never been there at all, leaving her with the fate of the Land on her

shoulders and too little strength to carry it alone.

The abrupt cessation of her nausea gave her no relief at all.

Read the *What Has Gone Before* section on September 9th, 2007!

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