

“The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”

Book Four

The Last Dark

Part I

“to bear what must be borne”

Chapter Three: Not Dead to Life and Use

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Chapter Three: Not Dead to Life and Use

Barely able to hold himself upright, Thomas Covenant stood on the cooled flow of Hotash Slay at the headland or boundary of the promontory where Foul’s Creche had once ruled the southeast. Beyond him and against the cliffs on either side, wild seas thrashed in the aftermath of the tsunami. He heard their turmoil, a thunderous seethe and crash like the frantic labor of the ocean’s heart. But through the surly dusk of a dawnless day, he could hardly see the eruption and spray and retreat of the lashed waves. There was no sun. Distinct as murders, the stars were going out.

This was a consequence of the Worm’s rousing, as it was of his resurrection. It heralded the world’s ruin. Now every death pierced him. Joan’s end felt like a knife in his own chest. Killing her, he had wounded himself--

He needed Linden. He did not know how to bear what he had become without her.

But he could not reach her. She was too far away--and he was too badly injured. A shard of stone at the edge of the Shattered Hills had restored the old gash on his forehead: an accusation confirmed during his confrontation with Joan. Blood still oozed into the drying crust around his eyes and down his cheeks. Falling on rocks and coral had gashed his ribs badly. Some of them were cracked or broken. Splinters of pain gouged every breath. His jeans and t-shirt had been shredded. A lattice-work of torn flesh and more blood marked his arms and chest and legs.

The *krill*’s heat must have burned his hands; his foreshortened fingers. But that damage, at least, he did not feel. Leprosy disguised his lesser hurts.

By comparison, the Humbled were almost whole. They, too, had been struck by scraps of flung rock. A cut marred the side of Branl’s neck. Clyme’s arms and tunic showed rents, contusions, small wounds. But they had not shared Covenant’s floundering on the seabed, or felt Joan’s blow. And they were *Haruchai*. They would be able to go on.

Now they appeared to be watching for some sign that the doomed sun would rise, or that the incremental extinction of the stars would cease. But perhaps they were waiting for the Ranyhyn. If they permitted themselves anything as human as prayer, they may have been praying that Mhornym and Naybahn had survived the tsunami.

Without mounts, there was nothing further that Covenant or the maimed Masters could do to defend the Land. The Shattered Hills were an indurated barricade thronging with *skest*, masterless and unpredictable. And the distance between him and Linden was impossible; scores of leagues--

His need for her was just one more wound that could not be healed.

The gloom lightened until it resembled mid-evening or the last paling before sunrise. But it grew no brighter. All of the illumination seemed to descend from the precise and imperiled stars. It was their lament.

The Worm was coming--and Covenant had no idea what to do. The light of the *krill*'s gem had gone out. There was no wild magic left in him. Simply staying on his feet required every shred of his remaining strength. He bore Joan's ring in the name of an unattainable dream.

Oh, he needed Linden. He needed to make things right with her before the end.

Such yearnings were as doomed as the stars. The *Elohim* had no hope of escaping the Worm's vast hunger.

Time may have passed, but he did not notice it. He did not notice that he was still bleeding. The stab of abused ribs when he breathed insisted that he was alive; but he ignored it. He did not think about anything except Joan and stars and Linden.

Long ago, he had promised that he would do no more killing. Now he was forsworn, as he had been in so many other ways.

Eventually Branl spoke. "Ur-Lord, we cannot remain as we are." Faithful as a grave, he carried Loric's *krill* clad in the remnants of Anele's apparel. "We will forfeit our lives to no purpose. If the *skest* do not assail us, privation and your wounds will bring death. We must delay no longer.

"If the Worm's advance may be measured by the fate of the stars, some few days will pass ere all time and life are extinguished. While they endure, a reunion with your companions--and with the Staff of Law--may yet be achieved. For that reason, we must abandon Naybahn and Mhornym. We must concede that they have perished. In their place, we must summon other Ranyhyn."

After a pause--a moment of hesitation?--he added, "And you must consent to ride. We cannot hope for your healing, except by the succor of the Staff."

Covenant meant to say, No. He meant to say, Never. He could not break more promises. But those words eluded him. Instead his knees folded, and he sank to the stone. Some other part of him croaked, "Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into."

He did not realize that he had spoken aloud until he tried to laugh. His chest hurt too much for laughter.

"Unbeliever?" Undercurrents of anger fretted Clyme's tone. He and Branl had followed Covenant into a *caesure*. They had saved him when he was lost. "Do you accuse us? These straits are not of our making."

For a while, Covenant could not imagine what Clyme was talking about. Then he managed to say, "Oh, you." He dismissed the notion. "I didn't mean you." Perhaps he should have laid the blame at the feet of the Creator; but he did not. "I meant Foamfollower. This is all his fault.

"If he hadn't insisted on keeping me alive. Making impossible things possible. Laughing in the Despiser's face. He was always the Pure One, even if he didn't think so himself. None of us would be here without him."

Even the Worm would not. Covenant would have died decades or millennia before Linden first met him.

Time was a Mobius strip. Every implication looped back on itself. Every *if* led to a *then* which in turn redefined the *if*. But his human mind could not comprehend causality and sequence in such terms.

The Humbled regarded him as if he were babbling. Their faces kept secrets. *Try to believe that you are pure.* Who had said that to him? Like his heart, his mind was failing. He could not remember. Then he could. It was one of the *jheherrin*; one of the creatures who had aided him after he had denied their prayer for salvation.

“Ur-Lord,” Branl said finally. “Your hurts undermine your thoughts. Salthart Foamfollower cannot be held to account for Corruption’s deeds.”

Baffled by the simplification of such reasoning, Covenant tried to shake his head. Instead the twilight seemed to waver as if it were dissolving; as if reality itself were in flux. “That’s not the point.” The point was that the *Haruchai* had no sense of humor. “The point is, I’m not going to ride the Ranyhyn.” Foamfollower would not have known how to laugh if he had not been so open and honest in his grief. “I made a promise.” A vow. “Promises are important. You know that at least as well as I do.”

“We do,” Clyme acknowledged. “We are the Humbled, avowed to your service. We comprehend given oaths. Yet yours contradicts ours. If you do not ride, your death becomes certain. This we will not permit while choice remains to us.”

They had entered a *caesure* for Covenant’s sake.

“Do you not comprehend the extremity of your straits? Weakened as you are, your oath cannot hold. Soon you will lapse from consciousness. Then we will summon the Ranyhyn and bear you away. This you can do naught to prevent. Where, then, is the harm in granting your consent?”

“Did you not permit Mhonym and Naybahn to retrieve you from the path of the tsunami? Did their aid not violate your word?”

You don’t understand. Covenant was too weak for this argument. He could not explain himself to the Humbled. Clyme and Branl had carried him: the Ranyhyn had not. The horses had only helped the Masters help him.

In various ways, the Ranyhyn had always aided him--but they did so because he did not ride.

He needed Linden. If nothing else, he had to ask her forgiveness. Express his love. Confess his sins. How else would he ever be able to put his ex-wife behind him? Nevertheless he could not face her like this. Not at the price of another broken promise.

Holding out his halfhand, he murmured, “Give me the *krill*.”

The Humbled looked uncertain in the preternatural twilight. Branl may have lifted an eyebrow. Clyme may have frowned. But apparently they could think of no reason to refuse. After a moment, Branl placed Loric’s dagger in Covenant’s grasp.

Trembling as though his burdens were too heavy for him, Covenant dropped the old cloth: Anele’s last legacy. He did not need it now. The *krill* was cold. Briefly he steadied the forged metal, peered at the inert gem. Then he reached up to pull the chain that bore Joan’s ring over his head.

“You know why the light went out. Joan was the only rightful white gold wielder here. The only one with a ring that belonged to her. The *krill*’s power died when she did.

“But I still have a claim on her ring. I married her with it.” “Til death do us part. “And I’m something more.” He had become so in the inferno of the Banefire, and in the apotheosis of his death by wild magic at Lord Foul’s hands. “I’m white gold.” How else had he been able to transmute Joan’s power, using it to heal his mind--and to refuse *turiya* Raver’s malice? “Mhoram said so. Maybe I’m not the rightful wielder of *this* ring, but I can still use it.”

Shaking, he pushed Joan's ring on its chain onto the little finger of his left hand. It stuck at the remaining knuckle, but he did not try to force it. He did not intend to wear it long.

With as much care as he could muster, he closed both hands around the haft of the *krill*. Then, suddenly desperate, he stabbed the blade at the stone under him.

The dagger was only sharp when it was vivified by the possibilities of wild magic. Lightless, it was dull. It could not pierce cooled lava.

But it did not. As he struck, the scale of his need and the fundamental strictures of his nature brought forth a familiar blaze from the gem: familiar and absolute, as necessary as breath and blood. It shone into his eyes like the nova of a distant star. The power-whetted blade cut inward as though the stone were damp mud.

When he took his hands away, his fingers and palms felt no heat: the numbed skin of his cheeks felt none. Nevertheless he trusted the efficacy of wild magic; believed that the *krill* was already growing hot.

Blinking through dazzles, he squinted at Clyme and Branl. At first, they were bright with phosphorescence, as spectral as the Dead. Then they seemed to reacquire their mortality. But they were not diminished. Rather they looked as precise and cryptic as icons in the dagger's brilliance. Together they confronted Covenant's display of power as if they were prepared to decide the fate of worlds.

As distinctly as he could, Covenant said, "I forbid you to put me on the back of a Ranyhyn. Find some other answer."

Then he sagged. He thought that he had come to the end of himself. The Humbled were right: he could not hold out against his wounds. He had lost too much blood, and was in too much pain. If Branl and Clyme did not obey him, he would have to trust the great horses of Ra to forgive him.

When he felt certain that he was done, however, he found that he was not. A distant sensation of power seemed to call him back from the collapse craved by his ravaged body. Involuntarily he straightened his spine, sat more upright. He imagined that he heard either Clyme or Branl say, This delay will prove fatal. Then he saw them recoil like men who had been slapped. He felt their surprise.

Directly in front of him, the figure of a man stepped into the light as though he had been made manifest by wild magic and the eldritch puissance of Loric's *krill*.

The newcomer seemed to emanate imponderable age. Indeed, he appeared to be fraying at the edges as he arrived, blurring as though he took in years and released vitality or substance with every breath. Nevertheless he looked taller than the Humbled--taller and more real--although he was not. His apparent stature was an effect of the light and Covenant's astonishment and his own magicks. He wore the ancient robes, tattered and colorless, of a guardian who had remained at his post, rooted by duty, for an epoch. Yet his features were familiar; so familiar that Covenant wondered why he could not identify them. A man like that--

After two heartbeats, or perhaps three, he noticed that Branl and Clyme were preparing to defend him. Or they were--

Hellfire.

--bowing. *Bowing?*

Together they each dropped to one knee and lowered their heads as if they were in the presence of some august figure incarnated from the dreamstuff of *Haruchai* legends.

In Covenant, memories reopened like wounds, and he recognized Brinn.

The *ak-Haru*. Brinn of the *Haruchai*, who had outdone the Theomach in mortal combat to become the Guardian of the One Tree.

Here.

If Covenant had ever doubted that the Worm was coming, he believed it now. There could be no surer sign than Brinn's arrival. Even the absence of the sun, and the slow havoc spreading among the stars, did not announce the Earth's last days more clearly.

While Covenant stared, open-mouthed and helpless, the *ak-Haru* approached until he was no more than two strides from the *krill*. There he stopped, ignoring the obeisance of the Humbled. His gaze was fixed on Covenant.

In a voice rheumy with isolation and too much time, he said, "My old friend." Words seemed to scrape from his mouth as if they had grown jagged with disuse. The skin of his face had been seamed and lined until it resembled a mud-flat now baked and parched, webbed with cracks. "I perceive that your plight is dire, as it has ever been. The fact that I have come is cause for sorrow. Yet it is cause for joy that my coming proves timely. Once again, I learn that there is hope in contradiction."

Illumined by Loric's gem, Brinn's eyes shone among their wrinkles with a warmth of affection that Covenant had not seen in any other *Haruchai* face.

"It is well," Brinn continued, "that you have reawakened the Vilesilencer's *krill*." Strain complicated his tone, but not his gaze. "Lacking some beacon to guide me across the wide seas, my search for you might have been delayed. However, you have done what must be done, as you have done from the first. For that reason among many others, I swallow my sorrow and greet you gladly, ur-Lord and Unbeliever, Thomas Covenant, friend."

Still Covenant stared. Only the pervasive force of Brinn's acquired theurgy kept him from crumpling. Never in life had Brinn of the *Haruchai* called him *friend*.

Sudden woe and rue and gratitude clogged his throat. He had to choke them down before he was able to inquire hoarsely, "What are you doing here?"

At the Isle of the One Tree, Brinn had told him, *That is the grace which has been given to you, to bear what must be borne*. Surely now Covenant had reached the limit of what he could be expected to endure?

Still Brinn did not glance at either of the Humbled. His attention belonged to Covenant alone. Speaking more sternly, as if he were setting friendship aside, he replied, "All things exist organically. This you know, Unbeliever. As one swells, another dwindles. As the Worm of death rises, the Tree of life declines." A lift of his hand referred to the heavens. "After long ages of slumber, the Worm now draws nigh unto the Land, seeking its final sustenance. In natural consequence, the One Tree expires to its roots. Thus I am freed of my Guardianship.

"Alas, my powers diminish as the Tree fails. I am made less by the deaths of stars and *Elohim*. And it was never my task to preserve the Worm's sleep, except by protecting the One Tree. I have no virtue to oppose the World's End. Nor am I permitted to do so, regardless of the leanings of my heart. That burden is yours, Unbeliever, as it is the Chosen's as well, and also her son's. Together you must save or damn the Earth, as it was foretold in the time of the Old Lords."

Then the *ak-Haru*'s manner softened until it resembled his gaze. "Yet I will not disregard the leanings of my heart. When I had achieved the stewardship of the One Tree, and you were thereby grieved, I assured you that good would come of it, when there was need. That promise I fain would honor. Therefore have I journeyed hither while some small portion of my strength

endures, bringing both gifts and counsel. Mayhap thereafter I will also be able to perform a service or grant a boon, if my life does not fray and fall in the attempt.”

Covenant went on staring as though he had been made witless. Part of him heard hope in every word. Part of him had already fled toward Linden, thinking, Gifts? Counsel? A chance to make things right with her? And part of him remained stunned, too astonished to comprehend anything. Brinn had come like a figure in a dream. In another moment, he would depart in the same fashion, with the same effectlessness.

But the Guardian of the One Tree did not appear to take offense at Covenant’s silence. His affection seemed to accept every facet of Covenant’s condition. Nodding at what he saw, the *ak-Haru* took one step back from the *krill*. Then at last he looked at Brann and Clyme, still half kneeling, still bowing their heads in homage.

Now his mien darkened. Lines of anger tightened his visage.

“First, however,” he pronounced severely, “I will deliver myself of a reprimand which has long festered within me, tainting my regard for those whom I must name my people.

“*Haruchai*, Masters, Humbled, I have come to reproach you.”

At once, Clyme and Brann arose. The manner in which they surged to their feet and folded their arms conveyed surprise and indignation. In every line, their stances offered defiance.

Stolid as a graven image, Brann stated, “You are the *ak-Haru* who was once named *Kenaustin Ardenol*, though you are now Brinn of the *Haruchai*. We do not lightly gainsay you. If you have cause to reproach us, however, you discern some fault which we do not find in ourselves.

“The weakness of uncertainty we acknowledge. Failure we likewise acknowledge. Against our given word, we have permitted Desecration, upon occasion because we were opposed by those whom we esteem, and upon occasion because the ur-Lord Thomas Covenant commanded it. Yet we have stood as Halfhands at his side. For his sake, we have dared the Lost Deep and She Who Must Not Be Named and Esmer *mere*-son. We have confronted the *skurj* and Cavewights and the Unbeliever’s own misbegotten scion. We have entered into a Fall, hazarding endless banishment from time and life, and have there given aid to the ur-Lord when he could not aid himself.

“You are the *ak-Haru*. Would you have done otherwise in our place? Wherefore will you reproach us?”

Brinn dismissed Brann’s protest with a soft snort. “Your valor is beyond aspersion,” he answered as if such things were trivial. Thunderclouds of ire seemed to gather about his head, contradicting the twilight and the clear stars. “Set aside your pride and hear me.

“Doubtless others have spoken of arrogance. I do not. Rather the fault with which I charge you is *simony*.” He spat that word. His eyes flashed dangerously, echoing the *krill*’s radiance. “You have grown ungenerous of spirit, demeaning what would else have been a proud heritage. You have withheld knowledge from the folk of the Land when knowledge might have nurtured strength. And you have withheld trust from Linden Avery the Chosen, setting yourselves in opposition to her efforts and sacrifices because you were unable to share her love and passion. These are the deeds of misers. They do not become you.

“Upon a time, the *Haruchai* were not ungenerous in this fashion. Had they not been ruled by open-handedness, they would have been less grievously stung by the Vizard’s scorn. Yet open their hands were, and open they remained. The bonds among them were as vital as sun and snows, and as enduring as mountains. The wounds of scorn they sought to heal by open means,

in direct challenge and honest combat. Thus it was that High Lord Kevin's generosity moved them to emulation. The Vow of the Bloodguard expressed an answering generosity, a desire to repay expansive welcome with expansive service until both welcome and service overflowed.

"Yet across the millennia of your Mastery you have allowed harsh times and cruel circumstances to bar the doors of your hearts. I will not cite your reasons for doing so, lest you deem yourselves thereby excused. Rather I say to you plainly that you have diminished yourselves until I am loath to acknowledge you as my people."

Instinctively Covenant wanted to defend Clyme and Branl. Oh, he agreed with the Guardian. How could he not? Nevertheless the Humbled had stood by him like the *Haruchai* of old. They had saved him again and again when he could not have saved himself.

But his companions did not turn to him for justification. They did not look at him at all. As if they were proud to be castigated, they faced Brinn squarely.

"*Ak-Haru*," Clyme replied, "this accusation is unjust." Tautness marred his flat tone. "We do not comprehend it. What deed of ours--or of any Master--has given rise to your wrath?"

At once, the Guardian retorted, "Are you truly so blind that you see no fault in naming yourselves 'the Masters of the Land'?" His voice had become a distant rattle of thunder. In spite of his diminishment, his words had the power to summon storms. "The Land is not a thing to be possessed as though it were a garment. It was not created for your use, that you might hazard it in a vain attempt to heal your ancient humiliation."

Unmoved, Branl countered, "Yet you yourself have done as we do. You are our exemplar. Our distrust of Linden Avery we learned first from you, who saw Corruption's hand at work in her, and who strove to preserve the Unbeliever from her errors."

Omens of lightning glared from Brinn's eyes. "I concede," he answered, "that I trod your path when I forsook the Unbeliever's service. What of it? Did Cail not return to speak of the Chosen's salvific efforts at the Isle of the One Tree? And if you did not heed him, did you also fail to heed the First of the Search and Pitchwife when they described the forming of a new Staff of Law, and the unmaking of the Sunbane?"

"No," he said harshly. "Do not protest that you have endeavored to treat the Chosen with both restraint and respect. I am not swayed. Your restraint and your respect are as miserly as your deeds. Had you permitted them to do so, the Giants would have reminded you that open hands and open spirits were once valued among the *Haruchai*. Yet for many centuries you have offered the kindred of the Unhomed naught but unwelcome."

"*Unwelcome*, forsooth!" The *ak-Haru*'s indignation was a thunderclap. "For the *Giants*, of all the peoples of the Earth. That is my reproach. Humbled, Masters, *Haruchai*, I marvel that you are not shamed."

Now even Covenant's numbed nerves and blunt health-sense felt tension rising in the Humbled. Brinn's objurgation stirred millennia of suppressed passions, of ire and resentment and denied helplessness, into living flames.

Speaking softly, ominously, Clyme asked, "Do you seek to renew our humiliation? Is that the purpose which has brought you among us, the last purpose of your life?"

"Paugh!" The Guardian made a dismissive gesture with both hands. "I am done with you. You do not hear, and so you cannot be redeemed. From this moment, I speak only to the Unbeliever. He will not disregard the remnants of my life, as you have done."

His gesture seemed to dispel the sensation of storms seething around him. He was definitely growing weaker, but he did not act weakened. Simply by turning away from the

Humbled, he thwarted their outrage; cast them into shadow. Now they stood silent, like men whose mouths had been sealed. When Brinn faced Covenant again, he was smiling with a hint of remorse--and also with an air of satisfaction.

On the far side of the *krill*, he seated himself cross-legged in front of Covenant. His eyes in their nests of seams and wrinkles glittered with refreshed affection. He sat with his elbows braced on his thighs and his chin propped on his fists; held himself leaning forward to study Covenant more closely. When Brinn was comfortably settled, however, he said nothing. Instead he gazed at Covenant as if he, the *ak-Haru*, had been made content by the sight of his old friend's face.

Covenant wanted to lie down. His forehead throbbed, and broken bones gnawed like teeth in his chest, biting deeper with every slight movement. Brinn's obscure intentions and the dammed fury of the Humbled and his own wounds exceeded him. He ached to close his eyes and slump backward and let everything go.

Yet he did not. His heart had not forgotten its stubborn litany of loves and needs. And the Guardian had come because he wanted to help in some fashion. Covenant could not allow himself to lapse while so much remained unresolved.

With an effort that nearly made him sob, he muttered, "You aren't exactly being fair. You know that, don't you?"

Brinn's smile grew warmer. "It is for this that I esteem you, Thomas Covenant--this among many other qualities. Regardless of your own plight, you do not neglect the hurts of your companions." Then his mien assumed more somber lines. "But now we must take counsel together. Your wounds are grave, my friend. Some healing you must have. Yet with healing will come sleep. It must, for your need is extreme. Therefore we must converse before I expend my waning strength. If you have not chosen your course, these Humbled will determine it on your behalf--and they will not determine wisely."

Covenant groaned. "You see me. You know what I've done. What's left? What can I possibly hope to accomplish?"

He meant, Take me to Linden. If you have that kind of power, use it. Before I'm too far gone to tell her I'm sorry.

The Guardian nodded. "Indeed, Unbeliever, I see you. Your desires are plain to me. You yearn to be reunited with Linden Avery the Chosen for the Land's sake, and for your own. Were these Humbled less parsimonious in their dealings, they would honor the passion which binds you to your loves. But I must urge you to reconsider the Land's peril.

"You have slain your former mate, a deed costly to you, and hurtful, yet nonetheless necessary. What then remains for you to attempt? Have you forgotten *turiya* Herem? He who reveled in your former mate's agony and abasement? He is not slain. Of that I need not assure you. You are already certain of it."

Oh, hell, Covenant thought. *Turiya*? But he did not have enough life left to curse aloud. On the fall of a shuddering breath, he asked, "You want me to go after *him*?"

Brinn's study did not waver. Instead of answering directly, he inquired, "He has failed Corruption's chief intent for him. What will he now essay in restitution?"

Hellfire. Covenant groaned again. He was in no shape to think, much less talk. Nevertheless he did what he could. Brinn had called him *friend*.

"He'll try to possess someone else. Or something else. He isn't good for much unless he's wearing a body."

The *ak-Haru* leaned closer. “Then whose flesh will he assume? Not yours, that is certain. He is not such a fool. Nor will he attempt the Humbled. Their intransigence has not waned. He cannot rule them. Among the *skest*, he may perchance strive to attain your death. But they are little, and by nature timorous, readily cowed. Also I deem that *turiya* Herem is too prideful to be contented by them.”

Covenant peered past the actinic brightness of the *krill* as if he were going blind. “So--?” His former companion faded in and out of focus. Give me a hint. I can’t keep doing this.

The Raver had a long head start.

Brinn watched as though his gaze could penetrate Covenant’s soul. “I ask again. Whose flesh will he assume? Of those that fear the Worm’s coming, which is comparatively near? Which is driven by hungers apt for possession?”

Covenant flinched at an intuitive leap. “What, the *lurker*?” He stared through a blur of argent and failing consciousness. “You want me to go after *turiya* before he can possess the *lurker*?”

So far, the monster had kept its word. True to the alliance, Horrim Carabal had sent the Feroce to rescue Covenant and the Humbled from the *skest*. But still-- The lurker of the Sarangrave had been a tale of horror for millennia. In some sense, it was the Despiser’s creation. Directly or indirectly, Lord Foul had invoked an immense and sentient atrocity from the poisons leaking out of Mount Thunder.

Now Brinn wanted Covenant to defend that--that thing--from *turiya* Herem?

The Guardian replied with a grin as poignant as the deaths of stars. “Name a better purpose, my friend, and I will honor it.”

Covenant meant to say, No. That’s insane. But then he thought, So what? The Worm was coming. He had killed Joan. Everything was insane. The idea of trying to track down and stop a Raver--in his condition--was probably no crazier than his desire to see Linden again.

Over the course of his life in the Land, he had caused or allowed terrible bloodshed. The Riders of the Clave whom he had killed personally were minor casualties compared to the uncounted villagers and *Haruchai* that he had forsaken to slaughter while he searched for the One Tree. Saltheart Foamfollower had died helping him. Inadvertently he had killed Elena, his own daughter. Then he had brought about the sacrifice of her spirit to She Who Must Not Be Named.

But he had never struck a blow against the Despiser’s most fatal servants. And the lurker possessed by a Raver would be an appalling foe. More insidiously dangerous than Roger and a whole host of Cavewights. Conceivably more powerful than *skurj* and Sandgorgons. If that monster challenged Linden, she would have to face it without Covenant or love.

Thinking about her made his wounds burn. His damaged ribs were acid and remorse in his chest. He wanted-- Oh, he *wanted*. Nevertheless he understood Brinn.

He rubbed at the crust around his eyes, touched the fresh accusation on his forehead. Eventually he managed to mutter, “Damnation, Brinn. I’m going to need a horse.”

The *ak-Haru* beamed at him like Loric’s gem. “And you will not ride the Ranyhyn. For this also I esteem you, ur-Lord. Yet a steed has been offered to you. You need only speak the beast’s name.”

Brinn’s voice invoked memories. As if from a great distance, Covenant heard the dying croak of the Ardent’s last gift.

“Ah.” In spite of his satisfaction, Brinn’s sigh conveyed a tinge of regret. “I see the recall in your gaze. My friend, you are indeed as I have remembered you. I am now content to provide those gifts which lie within my power.”

His vigor seemed undimmed as he rose to his feet.

“Remain only a short while,” he urged Covenant. “Your healing will be my second gift. Here is my first.”

While Covenant watched, stupefied by too many hurts, Brinn raised a hand to his mouth and gave one sharp whistle as clear as a commandment.

Covenant was losing his grip on consciousness. The only *Haruchai* who had ever called him *friend* had asked too much of him. He was no longer sure of what he saw or heard. The Guardian’s call may have echoed through the maze of the Shattered Hills. The stars appeared to draw closer. They seemed to cry out. Perhaps their wailing was underscored by a clatter of hooves, irregular and indefinite.

When the Ranyhyn arrived with their star-blazed foreheads shining like the emblems of *Elohim*, Covenant thought that he saw four of them.

Two must have been Mhornym and Naybahn. They looked worse than Covenant felt. Ripped flesh hung in strips from their sides, exposing the damaged gleam of bones, especially along their ribs and on their knees. Blood oozed everywhere as if they were coated in ruin. They limped on legs that should not have supported them, and their eyes were dull with mute agony.

But they were still alive. They had heard Brinn’s call. Somehow they had found the resolve to answer.

Proudly the *ak-Haru* announced, “Here are heroes. They have participated bravely and well in the defense of the Earth. Such battles are not won at a single stroke. They must be fought incrementally, by one selfless act of valor following another in its necessary sequence. Now Naybahn and Mhornym have completed their task. Their part is done. Though my strength wanes, I will preserve them. Then I will release them. While the Earth endures, no further service will be asked of them.”

Then he turned to the other horses, a palomino stallion and a black. “And here are Rallyn and Hooryl. They have come to bear the Humbled on a quest which will require much of them, and of their riders. That they do so fearfully is no fault in them. They are Ranyhyn. Fear will not hinder their service.”

Briefly Covenant looked at Clyme and Branl. The sight of them made him wince. His senses were too blunt to discern anything except rigid indignation.

But Brinn ignored the Masters. Facing Covenant again, he said as if he were bidding farewell, “Now, Unbeliever, Illender, Prover of Life, you must speak the name. Only its name will summon the steed and obtain its compliance.”

The stars were too close. Covenant had never seen them look so near. Yet their proximity only accentuated the voids between them, the immeasurable gulfs of their isolation. Vaguely he wondered whether the *Elohim* felt the same loneliness. Perhaps that explained their prideful self-absorption, their insistence that they were complete in themselves, *equal to all things*. Perhaps their surquedry was nothing more than compensation for prolonged sterility and sorrow.

But then the lamentation overhead and Brinn’s kindness compelled him. Swallowing the taste of blood and woe, he did as the Guardian of the dying One Tree asked or commanded.

“Mishio Massima.”

Brinn's smile was a confluence of hope and regret as he stepped past the *krill* to touch Covenant's blamed forehead lightly with one finger.

At the same time, he urged quietly, "Recall that the *krill* is capable of much. With use, it has become more than it was."

His touch seemed to light a star in Covenant's brain. Suddenly the dusk in all direction became a swirl of lights: the same swirl which had filled the Isle's cavern long ago when Covenant had tried to claim a branch of the One Tree. If Linden had not stopped him then, he might have brought about the world's end without realizing what he did.

He needed to make things right with her. He needed to tell her that he loved her--and that he had killed Joan.

Brinn had spoken of a service--a boon--but he had not revealed what it might be.

Then the stars took Covenant, and he went to sleep as if he were falling into the heavens.

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