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The Runes of the Earth

Written by Stephen Donaldson

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STEPHEN
DONALDSON

The Runes of the Earth



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*To Jennifer Dunstan –
The Princess of my Heart*

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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

THE CHRONICLES OF
THOMAS COVENANT THE UNBELIEVER

As a young man – a novelist, happily married, with an infant son, Roger – Thomas Covenant is stricken with leprosy. In a leprosarium, where the last two fingers of his right hand are amputated, he is taught that leprosy is incurable, and that his only chance of survival is to reject all hope of relief. Instead he must dedicate his life to avoiding anything which threatens his ability to protect himself. Horrified by his illness, he returns to his home on Haven Farm, where he finds that his wife, Joan, has abandoned and divorced him in order to protect Roger from exposure.

Other blows to his emotional stability follow. Fearing the inexplicable nature of his illness, the people around him cast him in the traditional role of the leper: a pariah, outcast and unclean. In addition, he discovers that he has become impotent – and unable to write. Grimly he struggles to go on living; but as the pressure of his loneliness mounts, he begins to experience prolonged episodes of unconsciousness, during which he appears to have adventures in a magical realm known only as the Land.

In the Land, physical and emotional health are tangible forces, made palpable by an eldritch energy called Earthpower. Because vitality and beauty are concrete qualities, as plain to the senses as size and colour, the well-being of the physical world has become the guiding ethical precept, the religion, of the people of the Land. When Covenant first encounters them, in *Lord Foul's Bane*, they immediately greet him as the reincarnation of an ancient hero, Berek Halfhand, in part because he has lost two fingers, and in part because he possesses a white gold ring – his wedding band – which they know to be a talisman of great power, able to wield 'the wild magic that destroys peace'.

However, Covenant chooses to interpret his translation to this

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magical place as a form of hallucination or dream. Shortly after he first appears in the Land, his leprosy and impotence disappear, cured by Earthpower; and this, he knows, is entirely impossible. Further, he knows that any acceptance of the idea that he holds some magical power will be a betrayal of the principles upon which his survival depends. Therefore he responds to his welcome and health in the Land with Unbelief: the harsh, dogged assertion that the Land is not real, and that attributing mystical or restorative powers to him serves only to undermine his ability to endure his actual life.

Because of his Unbelief, his initial reactions to the people and wonders of the Land are at best dismissive, at worst despicable (at one point, overwhelmed by his reborn sexuality, he rapes a young girl, Lena, who has befriended him). However, the people of the Land decline to punish or reject him for his actions. As Berek Halfhand reborn, he is beyond judgment. And there is an ancient prophecy concerning the white gold wielder: 'With the one word of truth or treachery, he will save or damn the Earth.' The people of the Land know that they cannot make his choices for him. They can only hope that he will eventually follow Berek's example by saving the Land.

At first, such forbearance conveys little to Covenant, although he cannot deny that he is moved by the ineffable beauties of this world, as well as by the kindness of its people. During his travels, however, first with Lena's mother, Atiaran, then with the Giant Saltheart Foamfollower, and finally with the Lords of Revelstone, he learns enough of the history of the Land to understand what is at stake.

The Land has an ancient enemy, Lord Foul the Despiser, who dreams of destroying the Arch of Time – thereby destroying not only the Land but the entire Earth – in order to escape what he perceives to be a prison. Against this evil stands the Council of Lords, men and women who have dedicated their lives to nurturing the health of the Land, to studying the lost lore and wisdom of Berek and his long-dead descendants, and to opposing Despite.

However, these Lords possess only a small fraction of the power of their predecessors. The Staff of Law, Berek's primary instrument of Earthpower, has been hidden from them. And the lore of Law and Earthpower seems inherently inadequate to defeat Lord Foul. Wild magic rather than Law is the crux of Time. Without it, the Arch cannot be destroyed; but nor can it be defended.

Hence both the Lords and the Despiser seek Thomas Covenant's

allegiance. The Lords attempt to win his aid with courage and compassion: the Despiser, through manipulation. And in this contest Covenant's Unbelief appears to place him on the side of the Despiser. He refuses to acknowledge the power of his wedding band. Like the Land's beauty and magic, it threatens his precarious grasp on life and sanity.

Nevertheless Covenant cannot deny his response to the Land's apparent transcendence. And as he is granted more and more forbearance and even friendship by the Lords and denizens of the Land, he finds that he is now dismayed by his earlier violence towards Lena. He faces an impossible conundrum: the Land cannot be real, yet it feels entirely real. His heart responds to its loveliness – and that response has the potential to kill him.

Trapped within this contradiction, he attempts to escape through a series of private bargains. In *Lord Foul's Bane*, he grants the Lords his passive support, hoping that this will enable him to avoid the demand that he learn how to use his ring. And at first his hopes are realised. The Lords find the lost Staff of Law; their immediate enemy, one of Lord Foul's servants, is defeated; and Covenant himself is released from the Land.

Back in his real world, however, he discovers that he has in fact gained nothing. Indeed, his plight has worsened: his experience of friendship and magic in the Land has undermined his ability to endure his outcast loneliness on Haven Farm. When he is translated to the Land a second time, in *The Illearth War*, he knows that he must devise a new bargain.

During his absence, the Land's plight has worsened as well. A number of years have passed in the Land; and in that time Lord Foul has gained and mastered the Illearth Stone, an ancient bane of tremendous power. With it, the Despiser has created an army which now marches to overwhelm the Lords of Revelstone. Although they hold the Staff of Law, they lack sufficient might to withstand the evil horde. They need the strength of wild magic.

Other developments also tighten the grip of Covenant's dilemma. The Council is now led by High Lord Elena, his daughter by his rape of Lena; and in her person, he begins to experience the consequences of his violence. It is clear to him – if to no one else – that she is not entirely sane. In addition, the army of the Lords is led by a man named Hile Troy, who appears to have come to the Land from

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Covenant's own world. His presence radically undermines Covenant's self-protective Unbelief.

Now more than ever Covenant feels that he must resolve his conundrum. Again privately, he offers a bargain. He will give the defenders of the Land his active support. Specifically, he will join Elena on a quest to discover the essence of Earthpower in its most concentrated form, the EarthBlood. But in return he will continue to deny that his ring holds any power. He will accept no responsibility for the ultimate fate of the Land.

This time, however, the results of his bargain are disastrous. Using the Illearth Stone, Lord Foul slaughters the Giants of Seareach. Hile Troy is only able to defeat the Despiser's army by giving his soul to Caerroil Wildwood, the Forestal of Garroting Deep. And Covenant's help enables Elena to find the EarthBlood, which she uses to sever one of the necessary boundaries between life and death. Her instability leads her to think that the dead will have more power against Lord Foul than the living. But she is terribly wrong; and in the resulting catastrophe both she and the Staff of Law are lost.

Covenant returns to his real world knowing that his attempts to resolve his dilemma ultimately serve the Despiser.

Nearly broken by his failures, he visits the Land once more in *The Power that Preserves*, where he discovers the full cost of his actions. Dead, his daughter now serves Lord Foul, using the Staff of Law to wreak havoc. Her mother, Lena, has become entirely insane. And the defenders of the Land are besieged by an army too vast and powerful to be defeated.

Covenant still has no solution to his conundrum: only wild magic can save the Land – and he cannot believe in it. However, sickened at heart by Lena's madness, and by the imminent ruin of the Land, he resolves to confront the Despiser himself. Powerless, he has no hope of defeating Lord Foul. Nevertheless he would rather sacrifice himself for the sake of a magical, but unreal, place than preserve his outcast life in his real world.

Before he can reach the Despiser, however, he must first face dead Elena and the Staff of Law. He cannot oppose her; yet she defeats herself when her attack on him draws an overwhelming response from his ring – a response which also destroys the Staff of Law.

Accompanied only by his old friend, the Giant Saltheart Foam-follower, Covenant finally gains his confrontation with Lord Foul and the Illearth Stone. Facing the full force of the Despiser's savagery

and malice, he at last finds the solution to his conundrum, ‘the eye of the paradox’: the point of balance between believing that the Land is real and believing that it is not. On that basis, he is able to combat Lord Foul by using the dire might of the Illearth Stone to trigger the wild magic of his ring. With that power, he shatters both the Stone and Lord Foul’s home, thereby ending the threat of the Despiser’s evil.

When he returns to his own world for the last time, he learns that his new-found balance benefits him there as well. He knows now that the reality or unreality of the Land is less important than his love for it; and that knowledge gives him the strength to face his life as a pariah without fear or bitterness.

the second chronicles of Thomas Covenant

For ten years after the events of *The Power that Preserves*, Covenant lives alone on Haven Farm, writing novels. He is still an outcast, but he has one friend, Dr Julius Berenford. Then, however, two damaged women enter his life.

His ex-wife, Joan, returns to him, violently insane. Leaving Roger with her parents, she has spent some time in a deranged commune which has apparently been manipulated by Lord Foul to desire Covenant’s destruction. Recognising the Despiser’s handiwork, and hoping to spare anyone else the hazards of involvement, Covenant attempts to care for Joan alone.

When Covenant refuses his aid, Dr Berenford enlists Dr Linden Avery, a young physician whom he has recently hired to work with him. Like Joan, she has been badly hurt, although in entirely different ways. As a young girl, she was locked in a room with her father while he committed suicide. And as a teenager, she killed her mother, an act of euthanasia to which she felt compelled by her mother’s illness and pain. Loathing death, Linden has become a doctor in a haunted attempt to put aside her past.

At Dr Berenford’s urging, she intrudes on Covenant’s treatment of his ex-wife. When Joan’s commune attacks, seeking Covenant’s death, Linden attempts to intervene, but she is struck down before she can save him. As a result, she accompanies him when he is returned to the Land.

During Covenant’s absence, several thousand years have passed

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in the Land, and the Despiser has regained his power. As before, he seeks to access Covenant's wild magic in order to break the Arch of Time and escape his prison. In *The Wounded Land*, however, Covenant and Linden soon learn that Lord Foul has fundamentally altered his tactics. Instead of using armies and warfare to goad Covenant, the Despiser has devised an attack on the natural Law which gives the Land its beauty and health.

The overt form of this attack is the Sunbane, a malefic corona around the sun which produces extravagant surges of fertility, rain, drought and pestilence in mad succession. So great is the Sunbane's power and destructiveness that it has come to dominate all life in the Land. Yet the Sunbane is not what it appears to be. And its organic virulence serves primarily to mask Lord Foul's deeper manipulations.

He has spent centuries corrupting the Council of Lords. That group now rules over the Land as the Clave; and it is led by a Raver, one of the Despiser's most ancient and potent servants. Pretending to resist the Sunbane, the Clave extracts blood from the people of the Land to feed the Banefire, the true source of the Sunbane.

However, the hidden purpose of the Clave and the Banefire is to inspire from Covenant an excessive exertion of wild magic. And towards that end, another Raver afflicts Covenant with a venom intended to cripple his control over his power. When the venom has done its work, Covenant will be unable to defend the Land without unleashing so much force that he destroys the Arch.

As for Linden Avery, Lord Foul intends to use her loathing of death against her. She alone is gifted or cursed with the health-sense, the ability to directly perceive physical and emotional health, which once informed and guided all the people of the Land. For that reason, she is uniquely vulnerable to the malevolence of the Sunbane as well as to the insatiable malice of the Ravens. The manifest evil into which she has been plunged threatens the core of her identity.

Linden's health-sense accentuates her potential as a healer. In addition, however, it gives her the capacity to possess other people; to reach so deeply into them that she can control their actions and emotions. For this reason, Lord Foul has chosen her. He intends to cripple her morally: he wishes to transform her into a woman who will be willing to possess Covenant in order to misuse his power. Surely, the Despiser believes, either Covenant or Linden will give him what he wants.

And if those ploys fail, Lord Foul has other stratagems in place to achieve his ends.

Horrified in their separate ways by what has been done to the Land, Covenant and Linden wish to confront the Clave in Revelstone; but on their own, they cannot survive the complex perils of the Sunbane. Fortunately, they gain the help of two villagers, Sunder and Hollian. Sunder and Hollian have lived with the Sunbane all their lives, and their experience enables Covenant and Linden to avoid ruin as they travel.

However, Linden, Sunder and Hollian are separated from Covenant near a region known as Andelain. They are captured by the Clave while he enters Andelain alone. It was once the most beautiful and Earthpowerful place in the Land; and he now discovers that it alone remains intact, defended from the Sunbane by the last Forestal, Caer-Caveral, who was formerly Hile Troy. There he encounters his Dead, the spectres of his long-gone friends. They offer him advice and guidance for the struggle ahead. And they give him a gift: a strange, ebony creature named Vain, an artificial being created for a hidden purpose by ur-viles, former servants of the Despiser.

Aided by Waynhim, cousins of the ur-viles, Covenant hastens towards Revelstone to rescue his friends. When he encounters the Clave, he learns the cruellest secret of the Sunbane: it was made possible by his destruction of the Staff of Law thousands of years ago. Desperate to undo the harm which he has unwittingly caused, he risks wild magic in order to free Linden, Sunder and Hollian, as well as a number of *Haruchai*, powerful warriors who at one time served the Council of Lords.

Unfortunately, a Raver has been at work torturing Linden, and she is now effectively comatose. When she has recovered somewhat, she and Covenant set out with Sunder, Hollian, Vain and a small group of *Haruchai* to seek for the One Tree, the wood from which Berek originally fashioned the Staff of Law. Covenant hopes to devise a new Staff with which to oppose the Clave and the Sunbane.

Faring eastwards, towards the Sunbirth Sea, Covenant and his companions encounter a party of Giants, seafaring beings from the homeland of the Giants of Seareach. One of them, mute Cable Seadreamer, has had a vision of a terrible threat to the Earth, and the Giants have sent out a Search to discover the danger.

Convinced that this threat is the Sunbane, Covenant persuades

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the Search to help him find the One Tree; and in *The One Tree Covenant*, Linden, Vain, and several *Haruchai* set sail aboard the Gianship Starfare's Gem, leaving Sunder and Hollian to rally the people of the Land against the Clave.

The quest for the One Tree takes Covenant and Linden first to the land of the *Elohim*, cryptic beings of pure Earthpower who appear to understand and perhaps control the destiny of the Earth. The *Elohim* agree to reveal the location of the One Tree, but they exact a price: they cripple Covenant's mind, enclosing his consciousness in a kind of stasis, purportedly to protect the Earth from his growing power, but in fact to prevent him from carrying out Vain's secret purpose. Guided now by Linden's determination rather than Covenant's, the Search sets sail for the Isle of the One Tree.

Unexpectedly, however, they are joined by one of the *Elohim*, Findail, who has been Appointed to ensure that Vain's purpose fails – and to bear the consequences if it does not.

Linden soon finds that she is unable to free Covenant's mind without possessing him, which she fears to do, knowing that she may unleash his power. When events force her to a decision, however, she succeeds at restoring his consciousness – much to Findail's dismay.

At last Starfare's Gem reaches the Isle of the One Tree. When one of the *Haruchai*, Brinn, transcends the Guardian of the One Tree, Covenant, Linden and their companions are able to approach their goal.

But their hope of obtaining the wood for a new Staff of Law is an illusion fostered by Lord Foul's manipulations – and by Findail's refusal to aid the Search in any way. Covenant's approach to the One Tree and his power begin to rouse the Worm of the World's End; and the Worm's awakening will accomplish Lord Foul's release from Time.

At the cost of his own life, Seadreamer succeeds at making Linden aware of the true danger. She in turn is able to forestall Covenant. Nevertheless the Worm has been disturbed, and its restlessness forces the Search to flee as the Isle sinks into the sea, taking the One Tree beyond reach.

Defeated, the Search sets course for the Land in *White Gold Wielder*. Covenant now believes that he has no alternative except to confront the Clave directly, to quench the Banefire and then to battle the Despiser; and Linden is determined to aid him, in part

because she has come to love him, and in part because she fears his unchecked wild magic.

With great difficulty, they eventually reach Revelstone, where they are rejoined by Sunder, Hollian and several *Haruchai*. Aided by a Sandgorgon of the Great Desert, they break down Revelstone's gates. Then Covenant, Linden and their friends give battle to the Clave.

After a fierce struggle, the companions corner the Raver which commands the Clave. There the Sandgorgon and Seadreamer's brother, Grimmand Honninscrave, succeed at 'rending' the Raver, although Honninscrave perishes in the attempt. Then Covenant flings himself into the Banefire, using its dark theurgy to transform the venom in his veins. With the danger that he will destroy the Arch thus diminished, he is able to quench the Banefire with wild magic.

When the Clave has been dispersed, and Revelstone has been cleansed, Covenant and Linden turn towards Mount Thunder, where they believe that they will find the Despiser. As they travel, still followed by Vain and Findail, Linden's fears grow. She realises that Covenant does not mean to fight Lord Foul. That contest, Covenant believes, will unleash enough force to destroy the Arch. Afraid that he will surrender to the Despiser, Linden prepares herself to possess him again, although she now understands that possession is a greater evil than death.

Yet when she and Covenant finally face Lord Foul, deep within the Wightwarrens of Mount Thunder, she is possessed herself by a Raver; and when she wins free of that dark spirit's control, she is no longer willing to interfere with Covenant's choices. And in fact he does surrender, giving Lord Foul his ring. But as the Despiser turns wild magic against Covenant, slaying his body, the altered venom is burned out of Covenant's spirit, and he becomes a being of pure wild magic, able to sustain the Arch despite the fury of Lord Foul's attacks. Eventually the Despiser expends so much of his own essence that he effectively defeats himself; and Covenant's ring falls to Linden.

Meanwhile, she has gleaned an understanding of Vain's purpose – and of Findail's Appointed role. Vain is pure structure: Findail, pure fluidity. Together they contain the necessary elements for a Staff of Law.

Using Covenant's ring, Linden melds Vain and Findail into a new Staff. Then, guided by her health-sense and her physician's instincts,

she reaches out with the restored power of Law to erase the Sunbane and begin the healing of the Land.

When she is done, she fades from the Land and returns to her own world, where she finds that Covenant is indeed dead. Yet she now holds his wedding ring. And when Dr Berenford comes looking for her, she discovers that her time with Covenant and her own victories have transformed her. She is now truly Linden Avery the Chosen, as she was called in the Land: she can choose to live her old life in an entirely new way.

THE LAST CHRONICLES OF
THOMAS COVENANT

BOOK ONE

The Runes of the Earth

PROLOGUE

'My heart has rooms'

Chapter One:

Mother's Son

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

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

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

And yet—

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

He was certainly insistent enough to be Thomas Covenant.

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

Avoiding the young man's gaze, she looked around the walls of her office without seeing them. At another time, the strict professionalism of this space might have eased her. Her displayed diplomas, like her tidy desk and heavy filing cabinets, served to vouch

for her. She had found comfort among them on other occasions. But today they had no effect.

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

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

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

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

I won't allow it.

Joan Covenant was as unreachable as her son claimed. She might as well have been catatonic, in spite of every conceivable drug and therapy. In fact, she would have died long ago without constant care. But she was not 'nothing' to Linden Avery. If Roger Covenant believed that, he would never understand the woman who stood in his way.

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

For his sake, she would not abandon Joan.

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

Hell, where did he get the *idea*?

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

She turned away for a moment to look out the window. It gave

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immediately she stood as well. She saw now that he was an inch or two shorter than his father, and broader in the torso. For that reason, among others, he would never evince the particular

gauntness, the cut and flagrant sense of purpose – all compromise and capacity for surrender flensed away – which had made Thomas Covenant irrefusable to her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*My heart has rooms that sigh with dust
And ashes in the hearth.*

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

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

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

She smiled now as Linden and Roger Covenant crossed the tiled lobby. In spite of Roger's presence, Linden replied with a smile of her own – less seraphic than Maxine's, but no less sincere. Maxine reminded Linden that she was not alone in her dedication to her work. Like Linden herself, and most of Berenford Memorial's staff, Maxine had committed herself to a need which the county acknowledged but could not meet.

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

They had taken her into the woods behind his home, where they had apparently planned to kill her in some bizarre ritual – a rite which included burning their own hands to stumps in a bonfire built

for the purpose. Although no one except Linden knew the truth, that rite had achieved its intended aim. It had lured Covenant into the woods on Joan's trail. There he had exchanged himself for her, and been killed.

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

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

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

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

Viscerally frightened and full of loathing, people had spurned Thomas Covenant as if he were a carrier of corruption. For over a decade, he had occupied Haven Farm on sufferance: seeing no one, never coming to town, avoided by his neighbours; occasionally harassed by the county sheriff, Barton Lytton; uncomfortably tolerated by his own lawyer, Megan Roman; befriended only by Julius Berenford, then Chief of Staff at County Hospital. Indeed, the county's

repugnance for Covenant's illness would have driven him into exile if he had not once saved the life of a snake-bitten girl. In addition, however, he made significant contributions to the care of the county's indigents – money which he earned by writing novels about guilt and power. In effect, he had supported the very people who brought about his death: the same people, presumably, who had driven his ex-wife mad. Therefore he was tolerated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Of course,' Linden countered. 'But what inspired your desire to take care of her? That's not as common as you might think. Frankly,

it sounds a little' – the term she wished to use was *de trop*, existentially dislocated – 'daunting.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even you, he seemed to say. Especially you.

Take her place.

Ten years ago, empowered by all of those hands thrust into the flames, all of that ceded pain, as well as by the fatal rush of Thomas Covenant's blood, a bitter malevolence had pierced the reality of Linden's life. It had drawn her in Covenant's wake to another place, another dimension of existence. The psychiatrists on call at Berenford Memorial would have called it a 'psychotic episode' – an *extended* psychotic episode. With Covenant, she had been summoned to a realm known as the Land, where she had been immersed in evil until she was altered almost beyond recognition. During the black hours of that one night, before Julius Berenford had found her with Covenant's body, she had somehow spent several months outside – or deep within – herself, striving to win free of her own weakness and the legacy of her parents in order to preserve the beauty of a world which had never been meant for corruption.

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

No. Shuddering, she came back to herself. It was impossible. She was flinching at shadows, echoes. Roger's father was dead. There

would be no second summons for her. The Land was Thomas Covenant's doom, not hers. He had given his life for it, as he had for Joan, and so its enemy, the dark being known variously as a-Jeroth, the Grey Slayer and Lord Foul the Despiser, had been defeated.

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

Roger's implied threat she ignored. Instead she asked, 'What do you mean, you have the "resources" to take her place?'

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

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

'She'll like that. She and my father were happy there.'

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

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

And Roger had not answered her real question.

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

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

'She isn't the only one who failed.'

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

And she was sure that she had not 'misheard' Roger.

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

Surely he would leave when he had seen his mother?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the bruise had first begun to bleed, Linden had covered it with a bandage; but that had made Joan frantic, causing her to thrash against her restraints until she threatened to break her own bones. Now Linden concentrated on trying to reduce the frequency of the

blows. On her orders, the wound was allowed to bleed: cleaned several times a day, slathered with antibiotics and salves to counteract an incessant infection, but left open to the air. Apparently it calmed Joan in some way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hard enough to wear calluses on her knuckles.

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

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

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

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