

THE ILLEARTH WAR

THE CHRONICLES OF THOMAS
COVENANT THE UNBELIEVER—BOOK TWO

STEPHEN R. DONALDSON



BALLANTINE BOOKS

The Illearth War

The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever—Book
Two

Stephen R. Donaldson



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A Del Rey eBook Edition.

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

Originally published in Mass Market in 1977 by Del Rey, an imprint of the Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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eISBN: 978-0-307-81867-6

www.delreybooks.com

Del Rey eBook edition: [DATE TK.]

v3.1_r1

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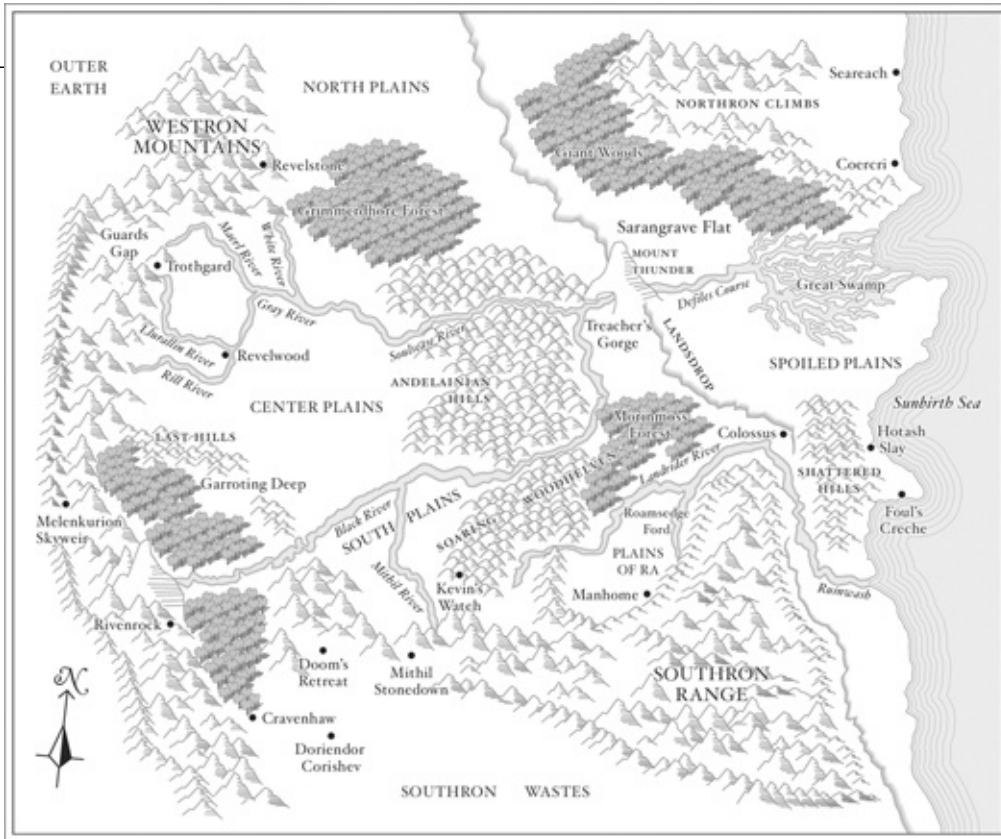
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What Has Gone Before

Thomas Covenant is a happy and successful author until an unfelt infection leads to the amputation of two fingers. Then his doctor tells him he has leprosy. The disease is arrested at a leprosarium, but he returns home to find himself an outcast. His wife has divorced him and ignorant fear makes all his neighbors shun him. He becomes a lonely, bitter pariah.

In rebellion, he goes to town. There, just after he meets a strange beggar, he stumbles in front of a police car. Disorientation overcomes him. He revives in a strange world where the evil voice of Lord Foul gives him a mocking message of doom to the Lords of the Land. When Foul leaves, a young girl named Lena takes him to her home. There he is treated as a legendary hero, Berek Halfhand. He finds that his white gold wedding ring is a talisman of great power in the Land.

Lena treats him with a mud called hurtloam, which seems to cure his leprosy. The sensations of healing are more than he can handle, and losing control of himself, he rapes Lena. Despite this, her mother Atiaran agrees to guide him to Revelstone; his message is more important than her hatred of him. She tells him of the ancient war between the Old Lords and Lord Foul, which resulted in millennia of desecration for the Land.

Covenant cannot accept the Land, where there is too much beauty and where stone and wood are subject to the power of magic. He becomes the Unbeliever, because he dares not relax the watchful discipline which a leper needs to survive. To him, the Land is an escape from reality by his injured and perhaps delirious mind.

At the Soulsease River, a friendly Giant takes Covenant by boat to Revelstone, where the Lords meet. There the Lords accept him as one of themselves, calling him the ur-Lord. But his message from Lord Foul dismays them. If Drool Rockworm—an evil Cavewight—holds the supremely powerful Staff of Law, their position is perilous indeed. They no longer have even the powers of the Old Lords, whom Foul overcame. Of Old Lord Kevin's Seven Wards of law, they have only the first, which they partly understand.

They determine to seek the Staff, held by Drool in caverns under Mount Thunder. Covenant goes with them as they flee through the attacks of Lord Foul's minions. They go south, to the Plains of Ra, where the Ramen serve the Ranyhyn, the great free horses. There the Ranyhyn bow to the power of Covenant's ring. As some recompense to Lena for what he did, he orders that one horse shall go to do her will each year.

Then the Lords ride to Mount Thunder. There, after many encounters with evil creatures and dark magic, they face Drool. High Lord Prothall wrests the Staff from Drool. They escape from the catacombs when Covenant manages to use the power of his ring—but without understanding how.

As the Lords escape, Covenant is beginning to fade away. He finds himself in a hospital bed a few hours after his accident. His leprosy has returned, suggesting it was all delusion. Yet he cannot quite accept any reality now. He is not seriously injured, however, and he is discharged from the hospital. He returns home.

This is a brief summary of *Lord Foul's Bane*, the first Chronicle of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever.

That beauty and truth should pass utterly

PART I — Revelstone

ONE: The Dreams of Men

By the time Thomas Covenant reached his house the burden of what had happened to him had already become intolerable.

When he opened the door, he found himself once more in the charted neatness of his living room. Everything was just where he had left it—just as if nothing had happened, as if he had not spent the past four hours in a coma or in another world where his disease had been abrogated despite the fact that such a thing was impossible, impossible. His fingers and toes were all numb and cold; their nerves were dead. That could never be changed. His living room—all his rooms—were organized and carpeted and padded so that he could at least try to feel safe from the hazard of bumps, cuts, burns, bruises which could damage him mortally because he was unable to feel them, know that they had happened. There, lying on the coffee table in front of the sofa, was the book he had been reading the previous day. He had been reading it while he was trying to make up his mind to risk a walk into town. It was still open to a page which had had an entirely different meaning to him just four hours ago. It said “... modeling the incoherent and vertiginous matter of which dreams are composed was the most difficult task a man could undertake....” And on another page it said, “... the dreams of men belong to God....”

He could not bear it.

He was as weary as if the Quest for the Staff of Law had actually happened—as if he had just survived an ordeal in the catacombs and on the mountainside, and had played his involuntary part in wresting the Staff from Lord Foul’s mad servant. But it was suicide for him to believe that such things had happened, that such things could happen. They were impossible, like the nerve health he had felt while the events had been transpiring around him or within him. His survival depended on his refusal to accept the impossible.

Because he was weary and had no other defense, he went to bed and slept like the dead—dreamless and alone.

Then for two weeks he shambled through his life from day to day in a kind of somnolence. He could not have said how often his phone rang, how often anonymous people called to threaten or berate or vilify him for having dared to walk into town. He wrapped blankets about himself like a bandage, and did nothing, thought nothing, recognized nothing. He forgot his medication, and neglected his VSE (his Visual Surveillance of Extremities—the discipline of constant self-inspection on which the doctors had taught him his life depended). He spent most of his time in bed. When he was not in bed, he was still essentially asleep. As he moved through his rooms, he repeatedly rubbed his fingers against table edges, doorframes, chair backs, fixtures, so that he had the appearance of trying to wipe something off his hands.

It was as if he had gone into hiding: emotional hibernation or panic. But the vulture wings of his personal dilemma beat the air in search of him ceaselessly. The phone calls became angrier and more frustrated; his mute irresponsiveness goaded the callers, denied them an effective release for their hostility. And deep in the core of his slumber something began to change. More and more often, he awoke with the dull conviction that he had dreamed something which he could not remember, did not dare remember.

After those two weeks, his situation suddenly reasserted its hold on him. He saw his dream for the first time. It was a small fire—a few flames without location or context, but somehow

pure and absolute. As he gazed at them, they grew into a blaze, a conflagration. And he was feeding the fire with paper—the pages of his writings, both the published best-seller and the new novel he had been working on when his illness was discovered.

This was true; he had burned both works. After he had learned that he was a leper—after his wife, Joan, had divorced him and taken his young son, Roger, out of the state—after he had spent six months in the leprosarium—his books had seemed to him so blind and complacent, so destructive of himself, that he had burned them and given up writing.

But now, watching that fire in dreams, he felt for the first time the grief and outrage of seeing his handiwork destroyed. He jerked awake wide-eyed and sweating—and found that he could still hear the crackling hunger of the flames.

Joan's stables were on fire. He had not been to the place where she had formerly kept her horses for months, but he knew they contained nothing which could have started this blaze spontaneously. This was vandalism, revenge; this was what lay behind all those threatening phone calls.

The dry wood burned furiously, hurling itself up into the dark abyss of the night. And in the fire he saw Soaring Woodhelven in flames. He could smell in memory the smoldering dead of the tree village. He could feel himself killing Cavewights, incinerating them with an impossible power which seemed to rage out of the white gold of his wedding band.

Impossible!

He fled the fire, dashed back into his house and turned on the lights as if mere electric bulbs were his only shield against insanity and darkness.

Pacing there miserably around the safety of his living room, he remembered what had happened to him.

He had walked—leper outcast unclean!—into town from Haven Farm where he lived, to pay his phone bill, to pay it in person as an assertion of his common humanity against the hostility and revulsion and black charity of his fellow citizens. In the process, he had fallen down in front of a police car—

And had found himself in another world. A place which could not possibly exist, and to which he could not possibly have traveled if it did exist: a place where lepers recovered their health.

That place had called itself "the Land." And it had treated him like a hero because of his resemblance to Berek Halfhand, the legendary Lord-Fatherer—and because of his white gold ring. But he was not a hero. He had lost the last two fingers of his right hand, not in combat but in surgery; they had been amputated because of the gangrene which had come with the onset of his disease. And the ring had been given to him by a woman who had divorced him because he was a leper. Nothing could have been less true than the Land's belief in him. And because he was in a false position, he had behaved with a subtle infidelity which now made him squirm.

Certainly none of those people had deserved his irrectitude. Not the Lords, the guardians of the health and beauty of the Land; not Saltheart Foamfollower, the Giant who had befriended him; not Atiaran Trell-mate, who had guided him safely toward Revelstone, the mountain citadel where the Lords lived; and not, oh, not her daughter Lena, whom he had raped.

Lena! he cried involuntarily, beating his numb fingers against his sides as he paced. How could I do that to you?

But he knew how it had happened. The health which the Land gave him had taken him by surprise. After months of impotence and repressed fury, he had not been prepared for the sudden rush of his vitality. And that vitality had other consequences, as well. It had seduced him into a conditional cooperation with the Land, though he knew that what was happening to him was impossible, a dream. Because of that health, he had taken to the Lords of Revelstone a message of doom given to him by the Land's great enemy, Lord Foul the Despiser. And he had gone with the Lords on their Quest for the Staff of Law, Berek's rune-staff which had been lost by High Lord Kevin, last of the Old Lords, in his battle against the Despiser. This weapon the new Lords considered to be their only hope against their enemy, and he had unwillingly, faithlessly, helped them to regain it.

Then almost without transition he had found himself in a bed in the town's hospital. Only four hours had passed since his accident with the police car. His leprosy was unchanged. Because he appeared essentially uninjured, the doctor sent him back to his house on Haven Farm.

And now he had been roused from somnolence, and was pacing his lighted house as if there were an eyot of sanity in a night of darkness and chaos. Delusion! He had been deluded. The very idea of the Land sickened him. Health was impossible to lepers; that was the law on which his life depended. Nerves do not regenerate, and without a sense of touch there is no defense against injury and infection and dismemberment and death—no defense except the exigent law which he had learned in the leprosarium. The doctors there had taught him that his illness was the definitive fact of his existence, and that if he did not devote himself wholly, heart and mind and soul, to his own protection, he would ineluctably become crippled and putrescent before his ugly end.

That law had a logic which now seemed more infallible than ever. He had been seduced, however conditionally, by a delusion; and the results were deadly.

For two weeks now he had completely lost his grasp on survival, had not taken his medication, had not performed one VSE or any other drill, had not even shaved.

A dizzy nausea twisted in him. As he checked himself over, he was trembling uncontrollably.

But somehow he appeared to have escaped harm. His flesh showed no scrapes, burns, contusions, none of the fatal purple spots of resurgent leprosy.

Panting as if he had just survived an immersion in horror, he set about trying to regain his hold on his life.

Quickly, urgently, he took a large dose of his medication—DDS, diamino-dephenyl-sulfonamide. Then he went into the white fluorescence of his bathroom, stropped his old straight razor, and set the long sharp blade to his throat.

Shaving this way, with the blade clutched in the two fingers and thumb of his right hand, was a personal ritual which he had taught himself in order to discipline and mortify his unwieldy imagination. It steadied him almost in spite of himself. The danger of that keen metal so insecurely held helped him to concentrate, helped to rid him of false dreams and hopes, the alluring and suicidal progeny of his mind. The consequences of a slip were acutely etched in his brain. He could not ignore the law of his leprosy when he was so close to hurting himself, giving himself an injury which might reawaken the dormant rot of his nerves, cause infection and blindness, gnaw the flesh off his face until he was too loathsome

to be beheld.

When he had shaved off two weeks of beard, he studied himself for a moment in the mirror. He saw a gray, gaunt man with leprosy riding the background of his eyes like a plague ship in a cold sea. And the sight gave him an explanation for his delusion. It was the doing of his subconscious mind—the blind despair-work or cowardice of a brain that had been bereft of everything which had formerly given it meaning. The revulsion of his fellow human beings taught him to be revolted at himself, and this self-despite had taken him over while he had been helpless after his accident with the police car. He knew its name: it was a death wish. It worked in him subconsciously because his conscious mind was so grimly devoted to survival, to avoiding the outcome of his illness.

But he was not helpless now. He was awake and afraid.

When morning finally came, he called his lawyer, Megan Roman—a woman who handled his contracts and financial business—and told her what had happened to Joan's stables.

He could hear her discomfort clearly through the connection. "What do you want me to do, Mr. Covenant?"

"Get the police to investigate. Find out who did it. Make sure it doesn't happen again."

She was silent for a long, uncomfortable moment. Then she said, "The police won't do it. You're in Sheriff Lytton's territory, and he won't do a thing for you. He's one of the people who thinks you should be run out of the county. He's been sheriff here a long time, and he gets pretty protective about 'his' county. He thinks you're a threat. Just between you and me, I don't think he has any more humanity than he absolutely needs to get reelected every two years."

She was talking rapidly as if to keep him from saying anything, offering to do anything. "But I think I can make him do something for you. If I threaten him—tell him you're going to come into town to press charges—I can make him make sure nothing like this happens again. He knows this county. You can bet he already knows who burned your stables."

Joan's stables, Covenant answered silently. I don't like horses.

"He can keep those people from doing anything else. And he'll do it—if I scare him right."

Covenant accepted this. He seemed to have no choice.

"Incidentally some of the people around here have been trying to find some legal way to make you move. They're upset about that visit of yours. I've been telling them it's impossible—or at least more trouble than it's worth. So far, I think most of them believe me."

He hung up with a shudder. He gave himself a thorough VSE, checking his body from head to foot for danger signs. Then he went about the task of trying to recover all his self-protective habits.

For a week or so, he made progress. He paced through the charted neatness of his house like a robot curiously aware of the machinery inside him, searching despite the limited functions of his programming for one good answer to death. And when he left the house, he walked out the driveway to pick up his groceries, or hiked for hours through the woods along Righters Creek in back of Haven Farm, he moved with an extreme caution, testing every rock and branch and breeze as if he suspected it of concealing malice.

But gradually he began to look about him, and as he did so some of his determination faltered. April was on the woods—the first signs of a spring which should have appeared beautiful to him. But at unexpected moments his sight seemed to go suddenly dim with

sorrow as he remembered the spring of the Land. Compared to that, where the very health of the sap and buds was visible, palpable, discernible by touch and scent and sound, the wood he now walked looked sadly superficial. The trees and grass and hills had no savor, no depth of beauty. They could only remind him of Andelain and the taste of *alianta*.

Then other memories began to disturb him. For several days, he could not get the woman who had died for him at the battle of Soaring Woodhelven out of his thoughts. He had never even known her name, never even asked her why she had devoted herself to him. She was like Atiaran and Foamfollower and Lena; she assumed that he had a right to such sacrifices.

Like Lena, about whom he could rarely bear to think, she made him ashamed; and with shame came anger—the old familiar leper's rage on which so much of his endurance depended. By hell! he fumed. They had no right. They had no right! But then the uselessness of his passion rebounded against him, and he was forced to recite to himself as if he were reading the catechism of his illness, Futility is the defining characteristic of life. Pain is the proof of existence. In the extremity of his moral solitude, he had no other answers.

At times like that, he found bitter consolation in psychological studies where a subject was sealed off from all sensory input, made blind, deaf, silent, and immobile, and as a result began to experience the most horrendous hallucinations. If conscious normal men and women could be placed so much at the mercy of their own inner chaos, surely one abject leper in a coma could have a dream that was worse than chaos—a dream specifically self-designed to drive him mad. At least what had happened to him did not altogether surpass comprehension.

Thus in one way or another he survived the days for nearly three weeks after the fire. At times he was almost aware that the unresolved stress within him was building toward a crisis, but repeatedly he repressed the knowledge, drove the idea down with anger. He did not believe he could endure another ordeal; he had handled the first one so badly.

But even the concentrated vitriol of his anger was not potent enough to protect him indefinitely. One Thursday morning, when he faced himself in the mirror to shave, the crisis abruptly surged up in him, and his hand began to shake so severely that he had to drop the razor in the sink in order to avoid cutting his jugular.

Events in the Land were not complete. By regaining the Staff of Law, the Lords had done exactly what Lord Foul wanted them to do. That was just the first step in Foul's plotting-machinations which had begun when he had summoned Covenant's white gold ring to the Land. He would not be done until he had gained the power of life and death over that entire Earth. And to do that, Foul needed the wild magic of the white gold.

Covenant stared desperately at himself in the mirror, trying to retain a grip on his own actuality. But he saw nothing in his own eyes capable of defending him.

He had been deluded once.

It could happen again.

Again? he cried, in a voice so forlorn that it sounded like the wail of an abandoned child. Again? He could not master what had happened to him in his first delusion; how could he so much as live through a second?

He was on the verge of calling the doctors at the leprosarium—calling them to beg!—when he recovered some of his leper's intransigence. He would not have survived this long if he had not possessed some kind of fundamental capacity to refuse defeat if not despair, and that capacity stopped him now. What could I tell them that they would believe? he rasped. I don't

believe it myself.

The people of the Land had called him the Unbeliever. Now he found that he would have to earn that title whether the Land actually existed or not.

And for the next two days he strove to earn it with a grimness which was as close as he could come to courage. He only made one compromise: since his hands shook so badly, he shaved with an electric razor, pushing it roughly at his face as if he were trying to remold his features. Beyond that, he acknowledged nothing. At night, his heart quivered so tangibly in his chest that he could not sleep; but he clenched his teeth and did without sleep. Between himself and delusion he placed a wall of DDS and VSEs; and whenever delusion threatened to breach his defense, he drove it back with curses.

But Saturday morning came, and still he could not silence the dread which made his hands shake.

Then at last he decided to risk going among his fellow human beings once more. He needed their actuality, their affirmation of the reality he understood, even their revulsion toward his illness. He knew of no other antidote to delusion; he could no longer face his dilemma alone.

TWO: Halfhand

But that decision itself was full of fear, and he did not act on it until evening. He spent most of the day cleaning his house as if he did not expect to return to it. Then, late in the afternoon, he shaved with the electric razor and showered meticulously. For the sake of prudence, he put on a tough pair of jeans, and laced his feet into heavy boots; but over his t-shirt he wore a dress shirt, tie, and sports coat, so that the informality of his jeans and boots would not be held against him. His wallet—generally so useless to him that he did not carry it—he placed in his coat pocket. And into a pocket of his trousers he stuffed a small, sharp penknife—a knife which he habitually took with him in case he lost control of his defensive concentration, and needed something dangerous to help him refocus himself. Finally, as the sun was setting, he walked down his long driveway to the road, where he extended his thumb to hitch a ride away from town.

The next place down the road was ten miles from Haven Farm, and it was bigger than the town where he had had his accident. He headed for it because he was less likely to be recognized there. But his first problem was to find a safe ride. If any of the local motorists spotted him, he was in trouble from the beginning.

In the first few minutes, three cars went by without stopping. The occupants stared at him in passing as if he were some kind of minor freak, but none of the drivers slowed down. Then, as the last sunlight faded into dusk, a large truck came toward him. He waved his thumb, and the truck rode to a halt just past him on the loud hissing of air brakes. He climbed up to the door, and was gestured into the cab by the driver.

The man was chewing over a black stubby cigar, and the air in the cab was thick with smoke. But through the dull haze, Covenant could see that he was big and burly, with a distended paunch, and one heavy arm that moved over the steering wheel like a piston, turning the truck easily. He had only that one arm; his right sleeve was empty, and pinned to his shoulder. Covenant understood dismemberment, and he felt a pang of sympathy for the driver.

“Where to, buddy?” the big man asked comfortably.

Covenant told him.

“No problem,” he responded to a tentative inflection in Covenant’s tone. “I’m going right through there.” As the automatic transmission whined upward through its gears, he spat his cigar out the window, then let go of the wheel to unwrap and light a new smoke. While his hand was busy, he braced the wheel with his belly. The green light of the instrument panel did not reach his face, but the glow of the cigar coal illuminated massive features whenever he inhaled. In the surging red, his face looked like a pile of boulders.

With his new smoke going, he rested his arm on the wheel like a sphinx, and abruptly began talking. He had something on his mind.

“You live around here?”

Covenant said noncommittally, “Yes.”

“How long? You know the people?”

“After a fashion.”

“You know this leper—this Thomas something-or-other—Thomas Covenant?”

Covenant flinched in the gloom of the cab. To disguise his distress, he shifted his position

on the seat. Awkwardly he asked, "What's your interest?"

"Me? I got no interest. Just passing through—hauling my ass where they give me a load to go. I never even been around here before. But where I eat at back in town I heard talk about this guy. So I ask the broad at the counter, and she damn near yaks my ear off. One question—and I get instant mouth with everything I eat. You know what a leper is?"

Covenant squirmed. "After a fashion."

"Well, it's a mess, let me tell you. My old lady reads about this stuff all the time in the Bible. Dirty beggars. Unclean. I didn't know there was creeps like that in America. But that's what we're coming to. You know what I think?"

"What do you think?" Covenant asked dimly.

"I think them lepers ought to leave decent folks alone. Like that broad at the counter. She's okay, even with that motor mouth, but there she is, juiced to the gills on account of some sick bastard. That Covenant guy ought to stop thinking of hisself. Other folks don't need that aggravation. He ought to go away with every other leper and stick to hisself, leave decent folks alone. It's just selfishness, expecting ordinary guys like you and me to put up with that. You know what I mean?"

The cigar smoke in the cab was as thick as incense, and it made Covenant feel light-headed. He kept shifting his weight, as if the falseness of his position gave him an uncomfortable sea sickness. But the talk and his vague vertigo made him feel vengeful. For a moment, he forgot his sympathy. He turned his wedding ring forcefully around his finger. As they neared the city limits, he said, "I'm going to a nightclub—just up the road here. How about joining me for a drink?"

Without hesitation, the trucker said, "Buddy, you're on. I never pass up a free drink."

But they were still several stoplights from the club. To fill the silence, and satisfy his curiosity, Covenant asked the driver what had happened to his arm.

"Lost it in the war." He brought the truck to a stop at a light while adjusting his cigar in his lips and steering with his paunch. "We was on patrol, and walked right into one of the antipersonnel mines. Blew the squad to hell. I had to crawl back to camp. Took me two days—I sort of got unhinged, you know what I mean? Didn't always know what I was doing. Time I got to the doc, it was too late to save the arm."

"What the hell, I don't need it. Least my old lady says I don't—and she ought to know better now." He chuckled. "Don't need no two arms for that."

Ingenuously Covenant asked, "Did you have any trouble getting a license to drive this rig?"

"You kidding? I can handle this baby better with my gut than you can with four arms and no sober." He grinned around his cigar, relishing his own humor.

The man's geniality touched Covenant. Already he regretted his duplicity. But shame always made him angry, stubborn—a leper's conditioned reflex. When the truck was parked behind the nightclub, he pushed open the door of the cab and jumped to the ground as if he were in a hurry to get away from his companion.

Riding in the darkness, he had forgotten how far off the ground he was. An instant of vertigo caught him. He landed awkwardly, almost fell. His feet felt nothing, but the jolt gave him an added throb to the ache of his ankles.

Over his moment of dizziness, he heard the driver say, "You know, I figured you got a head start on the booze."

To avoid meeting the man's stony, speculative stare, Covenant went ahead of him around toward the front of the nightclub.

As he rounded the corner, Covenant nearly collided with a battered old man wearing dark glasses. The old man stood with his back to the building, extending a bruised tin cup toward the passersby, and following their movements with his ears. He held his head high, but trembled slightly on his thin neck; and he was singing "Blessed Assurance" as if it were a dirge. Under one arm he carried a white-tipped cane. When Covenant veered away from him, he waved his cup vaguely in that direction.

Covenant was leery of beggars. He remembered the tattered fanatic who had accosted him like an introduction or preparation just before the onset of his delusion. The memory made him alert to a sudden tension in the night. He stepped close to the blind man and peered into his face.

The beggar's song did not change inflection, but he turned an ear toward Covenant, and poked his cup at Covenant's chest.

The truck driver stopped behind Covenant. "Hell," he growled, "they're swarming. It's like a disease. Come on. You promised me a drink."

In the light of the streetlamp, Covenant could see that this was not that other beggar, the fanatic. But still the man's blindness affected him. His sympathy for the maimed rushed up to him. Pulling his wallet out of his jacket, he took twenty dollars and stuffed them in the tin cup.

"Twenty bucks!" ejaculated the driver. "Are you simple, or what? You don't need no drink, buddy. You need a keeper."

Without a break in his song, the blind man put out a gnarled hand, crumpled the bills, and hid them away somewhere in his rags. Then he turned and went tapping dispassionately away down the sidewalk, secure in the private mysticism of the blind—singing as he moved about "a foretaste of glory divine."

Covenant watched his back fade into the night, then swung around toward his companion. The driver was a head taller than Covenant, and carried his bulk solidly on thick legs. His cigar gleamed like one of Drool Rockworm's eyes.

Drool, Covenant remembered, Lord Foul's mad, Cavewightish servant or pawn. Drool had found the Staff of Law, and had been destroyed by it or because of it. His death had released Covenant from the Land.

Covenant poked a numb finger at the trucker's chest, trying vainly to touch him, taste his actuality. "Listen," he said, "I'm serious about that drink. But I should tell you"—he swallowed, then forced himself to say it—"I'm Thomas Covenant. That leper."

The driver snorted around his cigar. "Sure, buddy. And I'm Jesus Christ. If you blew your wad, say so. But don't give me that leper crap. You're just simple, is all."

Covenant scowled up at the man for a moment longer. Then he said resolutely, "Well, in any case, I'm not broke. Not yet. Come on."

Together they went on to the entrance of the nightclub. It was called The Door. In keeping with its name, the place had a wide iron gate like a portal into Hades. The gate was lit in sick green, but spotlighted whitely at its center was a large poster which bore the words:

Positively the last night
America's newest singing sensation

Included was a photograph which tried to make Susie Thurston look alluring. But the flash gloss of the print had aged to an ambiguous gray.

Covenant gave himself a perfunctory VSE, adjured his courage, and walked into the nightclub, holding his breath as if he were entering the first circle of hell.

Inside the club was crowded; Susie Thurston's farewell performance was well attended. Covenant and his companion took the only seats they could find, at a small table near the stage. The table was already occupied by a middle-aged man in a tired suit. Something about the way he held his glass suggested that he had been drinking for some time. When Covenant asked to join him, he did not appear to notice. He stared in the direction of the stage with round eyes, looking as solemn as a bird.

The driver discounted him with a brusque gesture. He turned a chair around, and straddled it as if bracing the burden of his belly against the chair back. Covenant took the remaining seat and tucked himself close to the table, to reduce the risk of being struck by anyone passing between the tables.

The unaccustomed press of people afflicted him with anxiety. He sat still, huddling into himself. A fear of exposure beat in his veins, and he gripped himself hard, breathing deeply as if resisting an attack of vertigo; surrounded by people who took no notice of him, he felt vulnerable. He was taking too big a chance. But they were people, superficially like himself. He repulsed the urge to flee. Gradually he realized that his companion was waiting for him to order.

Feeling vaguely ill and defenseless, he raised his arm and attracted the waiter's attention. The driver ordered a double Scotch on the rocks. Apprehension momentarily paralyzed Covenant's voice, but then he forced himself to request a gin and tonic. He regretted the order at once; gin and tonic had been Joan's drink. But he did not change it. He could hardly help sighing with relief when the waiter moved away.

Through the clutch of his tension, he felt that the order came with almost miraculous promptitude. Swirling around the table, the waiter deposited three drinks, including a glass of something that looked like raw alcohol for the middle-aged man. Raising his glass, the driver drank down half his drink, grimaced, and muttered, "Sugar water." The solemn man poured his alcohol past his jumping Adam's apple in one movement.

A part of Covenant's mind wondered if he were going to end up paying for all three of them.

Reluctantly he tasted his gin and tonic, and almost gagged in sudden anger. The lime in the drink reminded him intensely of *alianta*. Pathetic! he snarled at himself. For punishment, he drank off the rest of the gin, and signaled to the waiter for more. Abruptly he determined to get drunk.

When the second round came, the waiter again brought three drinks. Covenant looked stiffly at his companions. Then the three of them drank as if they had tacitly engaged each other in a contest.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, the driver leaned forward and said, "Buddy, I got to warn you. It's your dough. I can drink you under the table."

To give the third man an opening, Covenant replied, "I think our friend here is going to last longer than both of us."

“What, a little guy like him?” There was humor in the trucker’s tone, an offer of comradeship. “No way. No way at all.”

But the solemn man did not recognize the driver’s existence with even a flick of his eye. He kept staring into the stage as if it were an abyss.

For a while, his gloom presided over the table. Covenant ordered again, and a few minutes later the waiter brought out a third round—three more drinks. This time, the trucker stopped him. In a jocose way as if he were assuming responsibility for Covenant, he jerked his thumb at the middle-aged man and said, “I hope you know we ain’t payin’ for *him*.”

“Sure.” The waiter was bored. “He has a standing order. Pays in advance.” Disdain seemed to tighten his face, pulling it together like the closing of a fist around his nose. “Comes here every night just to watch her and drink himself blind.” Then someone else signaled to him and he was gone.

For a moment, the third man said nothing. Slowly the houselights went down, and an expectant hush dropped like a shroud over the packed club. Then into the silence the man croaked quietly, “My wife.”

A spotlight centered on the stage, and the club MC came out of the wings. Behind him, musicians took their places—a small combo, casually dressed.

The MC flashed out a smile, started his spiel. “It makes me personally sad to introduce our little lady tonight, because this is the last time she’ll be with us—for a while, at least. She’s going on from here to the places where famous people get famouser. We at The Door won’t soon forget her. Remember, you heard her here first. Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Susie Thurston!”

The spotlight picked up the singer as she came out, carrying a hand microphone. She wore a leather outfit—a skirt that left most of her legs bare and a sleeveless vest with a fringe across her breasts, emphasizing their movement. Her blond hair was bobbed short, and her eyes were dark, surrounded by deep hollow circles like bruises. She had a full and welcoming figure, but her face denied it; she wore the look of an abandoned waif. In a pure, frail voice that would have been good for supplication, she sang a set of love ballads defiantly, as if they were protest songs. The applause after each number was thunderous, and Covenant quaked at the sound. When the set was over and Susie Thurston retired for a break, he was sweating coldly.

The gin seemed to be having no effect on him. But he needed some kind of help. With an aspect of desperation, he signaled for another round. To his relief, the waiter brought the drinks soon.

After he had downed his Scotch, the driver hunched forward purposefully, and said, “I think I got this bastard figured out.”

The solemn man was oblivious to his tablemates. Painfully, he croaked again, “My wife.”

Covenant wanted to keep the driver from talking about the third man so openly, but before he could distract him, his guest went on, “He’s doing it out of spite, that’s what.”

“Spite?” echoed Covenant helplessly. He missed the connection. As far as he could tell, their companion—no doubt happily or at least doggedly married, no doubt childless—had somehow conceived a hopeless passion for the waif-woman behind the microphone. Such things happened. Torn between his now-grim fidelity and his obdurate need, he could do nothing but torment himself in search of release, drink himself into stupefaction staring at the

thing he wanted and both could not and should not have.

With such ideas about their tablemate, Covenant was left momentarily at sea by the driver's comment. But the big man went on almost at once. "Course. What'd you think, being a leper is fun? He's thinking he'll just sort of share it around. Why be the only one, you know what I mean? That's what this bastard thinks. Take my word, buddy. I got him figured out. As he spoke, his cobbled face loomed before Covenant like a pile of thetic rubble. "What he does, he goes around where he ain't known, and he hides it, like, so nobody knows he's sick. That way he spreads it; nobody knows so they don't take care, and all of a sudden we got an epidemic. Which makes Covenant laugh hisself crazy. Spite, like I tell you. You take my word. Don't go shaking hands when you don't know the guy you're shaking with."

Dully the third man groaned, "My wife."

Gripping his wedding band as if it had the power to protect him, Covenant said intently. "Maybe that isn't it. Maybe he just needs people. Do you ever get lonely—driving that rig all alone, hour after hour? Maybe this Thomas Covenant just can't stand to go on living without seeing other faces once in a while. Did you think about that?"

"So let him stick to lepers. What call is he got to bother decent folks? Use your head."

Use my head? Covenant almost shouted. Hellfire! What do you think I'm doing? Do you think I like doing this, being here? A grimace that he could not control clutched his face. Fuming he waved for more drinks. The alcohol seemed to be working in reverse, tightening his tension rather than loosening it. But he was too angry to know whether or not he was getting drunk. The air swarmed with the noise of The Door's patrons. He was conscious of the people behind him as if they lurked there like ur-viles.

When the drinks came, he leaned forward to refute the driver's arguments. But he was stopped by the dimming of the lights for Susie Thurston's second set.

Bleakly their tablemate groaned, "My wife." His voice was starting to blur around the edges; whatever he was drinking was finally affecting him.

In the moment of darkness before the MC came on, the driver responded, "You mean the broad's your wife?"

At that, the man moaned as though in anguish.

After a quick introduction, Susie Thurston reseated herself within the spotlight. Over querulous accompaniment from her combo, she put some sting into her voice, and sang about the infidelities of men. After two numbers, there were slow tears running from the dark wounds of her eyes.

The sound of her angry laments made Covenant's throat hurt. He regretted fiercely that he was not drunk. He would have liked to forget people and vulnerability and stubborn survival—forget and weep.

But her next song burned him. With her head back so that her white throat gleamed in the light, she sang a song that ended,

Let go my heart—

Your love makes me look small to myself.

Now, I don't want to give you any hurt,

But what I feel is part of myself:

What you want turns what I've got to dirt—

So let go of my heart.

Applause leaped on the heels of her last note, as if the audience were perversely hungry for her pain. Covenant could not endure any more. Buffeted by the noise, he threw dollars—did not count them—on the table, and shoved back his chair to escape.

But when he moved around the table, he passed within five feet of the singer. Suddenly she saw him. Spreading her arms, she exclaimed joyfully, “Berek!”

Covenant froze, stunned and terrified. No!

Susie Thurston was transported. “Hey!” she called, waving her arms to silence the applause, “Get a spot out here! On him! Berek! Berek, honey!”

From over the stage, a hot white light spiked down at Covenant. Impaled in the glare, he turned to face the singer, blinking rapidly and aching with fear and rage.

No!

“Ladies and gentlemen, kind people, I want you to meet an old friend of mine, a dear man.” Susie Thurston was excited and eager. “He taught me half the songs I know. Folks, this is Berek.” She began clapping for him as she said, “Maybe he’ll sing for us.” Good-naturedly the audience joined her applause.

Covenant’s hands limped about him, searching for support. In spite of his efforts to control himself, he stared at his betrayer with a face full of pain. The applause reverberated in his ears, made him dizzy.

No!

For a long moment, he cowered under Susie Thurston’s look. Then, like a wash of revelation, all the houselights came on. Over the bewildered murmurs and rustlings of the audience, a commanding voice snapped, “Covenant.”

Covenant spun as if to ward off an attack. In the doorway, he saw two men. They both wore black hats and khaki uniforms, pistols in black holsters, silver badges; but one of them towered over the other. Sheriff Lytton. He stood with his fists on his hips. As Covenant gaped at him, he beckoned with two fingers. “You, Covenant. Come here.”

“Covenant?” the trucker yelped. “You’re really Covenant?”

Covenant heeled around awkwardly, as if under tattered canvas, to meet this fresh assault. As he focused his eyes on the driver, he saw that the big man’s face was flushed with vehemence. He met the red glare as bravely as he could. “I told you I was.”

“Now I’m going to get it!” the driver grated. “We’re all going to get it! What the hell’s the matter with you?”

The patrons of The Door were thrusting to their feet to watch what was happening. Over their heads, the sheriff shouted, “Don’t touch him!” and began wading through the crowd.

Covenant lost his balance in the confusion. He tripped, caught something like a thumb on the corner of a chair in his eye, and sprawled under a table.

People yelled and milled around. The sheriff roared orders through the din. Then with one heave of his arm, he knocked away the table over Covenant.

Covenant looked gauntly up from the floor. His bruised eye watered thickly, distorting everything over him. With the back of his hand, he pushed away the tears. Blinking and concentrating fiercely, he made out two men standing above him—the sheriff and his former tablemate.

Swaying slightly on locked knees, the solemn man looked dispassionately down

Covenant. In a smudged and expended voice, he delivered his verdict. “My wife is the finest woman in the world.”

The sheriff pushed the man away, then bent over Covenant, brandishing a face full of teeth. “That’s enough. I’m just looking for something to charge you with, so don’t give me any trouble. You hear me? Get up.”

Covenant felt too weak to move, and he could not see clearly. But he did not want the kind of help the sheriff might give him. He rolled over and pushed himself up from the floor.

He reached his feet, listing badly to one side; but the sheriff made no move to support him. He braced himself on the back of a chair, and looked defiantly around the hushed spectators. At last, the gin seemed to be affecting him. He pulled himself erect, adjusted his tie with a show of dignity.

“Get going,” the sheriff commanded from his superior height.

But for one more moment Covenant did not move. Though he could not be sure of anything he saw, he stood where he was and gave himself a VSE.

“Get going,” Lytton repeated evenly.

“Don’t touch me.” When his VSE was done, Covenant turned and stalked grayly out of the nightclub.

Out in the cool April night, he breathed deeply, steadying himself. The sheriff and his deputy herded him toward a squad car. Its red warning lights flashed balefully. When he was locked into the back seat behind the protective steel grating, the two officers climbed into the front. While the deputy drove away in the direction of Haven Farm, the sheriff spoke through the grating.

“Took us too long to find you, Covenant. The Millers reported you were trying to hitchhike, and we figured you were going to try your tricks somewhere. Just couldn’t tell where. But it’s still my county, and you’re walking trouble. There’s no law against you—I can’t arrest you for what you’ve done. But it sure was mean. Listen, you. Taking care of this county is my business, and don’t you forget it. I don’t want to hunt around like this for you. You pull that stunt again, and I’ll throw you in the can for disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, and everything else I can think of. You got that?”

Shame and rage struggled in Covenant, but he could find no way to let them out. He wanted to yell through the grate, It isn’t catching! It’s not my fault! But his throat was too constricted; he could not release the wail. At last, he could only mumble, “Let me out. I’ll walk.”

Sheriff Lytton regarded him closely, then said to the deputy, “All right. We’ll let him walk. Maybe he’ll have an accident.” Already they were well out of town.

The deputy drove to a halt on the berm, and the sheriff let Covenant out. For a moment they stood together in the night. The sheriff glared at him as if trying to measure his capacity to do harm. Then Lytton said, “Go home. Stay home.” He got back into the car. It made a loud squealing turn and fled back toward town. An instant later, Covenant sprang into the road and cried after the taillights, “Leper outcast unclean!” They looked as red as blood in the darkness.

His shout did not seem to dent the silence. Before long, he turned back toward Haven Farm, feeling as small as if the few stars in the dense black sky were deriding him. He had ten miles to walk.

The road was deserted. He moved in empty stillness like a hiatus in his surrounding though he was retreating into open countryside, he could hear no sounds, no night talk of birds or insects. The silence made him feel deaf and alone, vulnerable to the hurrying vultures at his back.

It was a delusion! He raised his protest like a defiance; but even to his ears, it had the hollow ring of despair, composed equally of defeat and stubbornness. Through it, he could hear the girl shouting *Berek!* like the siren of a nightmare.

Then the road went through a stand of trees which cut out the dim light of the stars. He could not feel the pavement with his feet; he was in danger of missing his way, of falling into a ditch or injuring himself against a tree. He tried to keep up his pace, but the risk was too great, and finally he was reduced to waving his arms before him and testing his footing like a blind man. Until he reached the end of the woods, he moved as if he were wandering lost in a dream, damp with sweat, and cold.

After that, he set a hard pace for himself. He was spurred on by the cries that rushed after him, *Berek! Berek!* When at last, long miles later, he reached the driveway into Haven Farm, he was almost running,

In the sanctuary of his house, he turned on all the lights and locked the doors. The organized chastity of his living space surrounded him with its unconsoling dogma. A glance at the kitchen clock told him that the time was just past midnight. A new day, Sunday—a day when other people worshiped. He started some coffee, threw off his jacket, tie, and dress shirt, then carried his steaming cup into the living room. There he took a position on the sofa, adjusted Joan's picture on the coffee table so that it looked straight at him, and braced himself to weather the crisis.

He needed an answer. His resources were spent, and he could not go on the way he was.

Berek!

The girl's shout, and the raw applause of her audience, and the trucker's outrage reverberated in him like muffled earth tremors. Suicide loomed in all directions. He was trapped between mad delusion and the oppressive weight of his fellow human beings.

Leper outcast unclean!

He gripped his shoulders and hugged himself to try to still the gasping of his heart.

I can't stand it! Somebody help me!

Suddenly, the phone rang—cut through him as stridently as a curse. Disjointedly like a loose collection of broken bones, he jumped to his feet. But then he did not move. He lacked the courage to face more hostility, indemnification.

The phone shrilled again.

His breath shuddered in his lungs. Joan seemed to reproach him from behind the glass of the picture frame.

Another ring, as insistent as a fist.

He lurched toward the phone. Snatching up the receiver, he pressed it to his ear to hold it steady.

"Tom?" a faint, sad voice sighed. "Tom—it's Joan. Tom? I hope I didn't wake you. I know it's late, but I had to call. Tom?"

Covenant stood straight and stiff, at attention, with his knees locked to keep him from falling. His jaw worked, but he made no sound. His throat felt swollen shut, clogged with

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