

The Deliverer

Sword of Lyric Series – Book 4

By Sharon Hinck

Chapter One – LINETTE

Frantic pounding invaded my dreams, and I bolted upright on my pallet. Angular shadows tilted toward me. The strident scent of stone and metal was unfamiliar and ... wrong.

Hazor. I was in my quarters in the palace, deep inside the capital city of Sidian.

“Linette! We need you.” Nolan’s normally stoic voice gasped from the outer hall. He banged again, and I pulled on my songkeeper’s robe as I raced to the door. I triggered the magnetic lock, and the door slipped sideways into the wall.

Under his dark bangs, Nolan’s eyes were huge. His chest heaved. Panic splashed dozens of scenarios through my thoughts. Had King Zarek revoked his protection? Did we need to flee for our lives? Or had Nolan heard dire news from the clans?

“The baby,” Nolan said, breathless. “Hurry.”

“Is Kendra in trouble?”

“Bleating like a caradoc.”

I’d kept my worries hidden as her time to deliver the baby neared. Now all my apprehensions burst free. My hands shook as I knotted my belt.

Nolan raced ahead of me down the hallway, disappearing at the first sharp angle. The hall doubled back on itself briefly, then bent sharply again. The odd design might make the path more difficult for invaders, but tonight the palace’s frustrating architecture made me want to fire a syncbeam straight through the walls.

I ran to catch up as Nolan opened the door to Tristan and Kendra's rooms.

Inside, Kieran spun to face us, bootknife in hand, muscles tense. He waved us into the room, then stepped to the door, checking both directions of the hallway before putting away the knife. "What took you so long?" he snapped at his son. Turning to me, he glowered. "We don't know what to do."

And he thought I did? We were in a strange land, far from any healers. "When did her pains start?"

Kieran and Nolan exchanged helpless looks. They'd clearly be useless. A groan carried from the inner room, sending an anguished expression across Kieran's face. Poor man. He could count the people he cared about on one hand. His sister, Kendra, and his friend Tristan were two. No wonder he was worried.

I brushed past him to the inner room. The lightwall within was dimmed to a gentle level. I expected to find Kendra writhing on her pallet, but she stood with her palms braced against the wall. Tristan rubbed her back and whispered something in her ear. As a tremor moved through her, I heard another groan. Not from Kendra, but Tristan.

When he noticed me, gratitude chased away a measure of his fear. "Thank the One you're here. How can I help her?"

Kendra straightened, drew a slow breath, and smiled at me. "I told them not to wake you. I'm fine. But since you're here, would you please make these men calm down?"

Tristan's eyes showed white like a panicked lehkan's. Kieran and Nolan's gazes peered anxiously from the door. My lips twitched. "If you think I can calm them, you're overestimating my skills."

She managed a short laugh, but gasped as a pain took her. Tristan reached to support her, but she waved him away.

He turned to me. “Do something.”

“Would you like me to call Havid?” I asked Kendra. The older songkeeper and her husband had come to Hazor with us—although whether they were more help or hindrance was a matter for debate.

Kendra snorted. “That old crone? No, I don’t want her here.”

I’d probably feel the same way in Kendra’s place. But that left only one woman from the clans to assist her. Me.

After the pain eased, Kendra prowled the room, taking slow steps, her arms wrapped around her middle. I tugged Tristan’s arm to get his full attention. Once he met my eyes, I summoned my firmest tone. “I can’t give Kendra all my focus if I have to keep reassuring you three men. She needs peace and confidence. Can you do that?”

Tristan, a toughened guardian who could wield a sword against the fiercest enemies, swallowed hard and barely managed a nod.

Then he pulled me nearer the door. “I was thinking,” he whispered. “Maybe we should call for one of Zarek’s practitioners.”

Kendra marched across the room and whacked Tristan’s shoulder. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“But if they could help ...”

“My baby is not coming into this life with dark arts and—” Kendra broke off to wince and press her hands against the wall again. Her muscles strained as if she wanted to push the stone outward and expand the room. Sweat beaded her forehead.

Arguments wouldn't help her through this. "Nolan, go get my rondalin. It's in the cubby in the great room of my quarters. Kieran, brew some clavo. Keep it weak, but make plenty. Tristan, we'll want more blankets."

As the men scattered, Kendra drew a deep breath, released the wall, and hugged me. "Thank you." She paced the room a few times. "You have attended births back in Braide Wood, haven't you?"

"Of course." I smoothed the blankets on her pallet and didn't meet her gaze. This wasn't the time to explain that I'd simply provided small comforts and music. Only experienced mothers assisted with the actual birth. I'd kept to the background where I belonged ... and where I wished I could be now.

She sank onto her pallet and leaned back against the wall. Kendra was one of the strongest women I knew. She had the sharp mind of a transtech and the courage of a guardian. But fatigue shadowed her eyes, a frightening reminder of how haggard she'd appeared after the Rhusican poison. Frailty lingered in her slim frame.

I sat beside her and rested my hand on her swollen abdomen. "When did the pains begin?"

"All ... night." Her breath caught and her hands dug into the pallet. "Didn't want to ... wake Tristan ... but now ..."

"Now it's time," I said, forcing reassurance into my voice. "And I'm here to help."

The tightness grabbing her belly finally eased. She adjusted to find a more comfortable position. The humor she'd shown at the men's fussing had faded, and her eyes welled with uncertainty as she focused on me. "We tried for so long. We thought this was a

blessing we would never have. What if ... what if I can't? Maybe we aren't meant to have a child."

"You already do. We just need to help him enter the world." I gathered her hands in mine and buried my own worries. Doubt could bleed into a soul as quickly as Rhusican poison, diluting the joy and trust meant to live there. I needed to cling to truth for both our sakes. "The One cradles you in His love. He never looks away."

"Not even in Hazor?" Kendra managed a breathy laugh, then sighed. "I wish we were in Braide Wood."

"I know. But yes, even here. Even on our hardest roads. Especially then."

Nolan cleared his throat from the doorway, a bundle in his arms that he thrust in my direction.

"Thank you," I said, taking the round stringed instrument from its protective wrap.

He spared me a shy smile before backing skittishly out of sight. I settled on the floor near Kendra and tested a few strings. The tone was as smooth as warm water. "I hope I can remember the order of the welcome songs. It's been several seasons since I attended my last birth."

Kendra smiled and rubbed her belly. "Play quickly. I'm ready to meet this baby."

I began the first of the traditional songs, relieved when the music helped Kendra relax. She braced herself during the next pain, but this time no fear tightened the lines of her face. My own worries gave way to the beauty and strength of the songs. So often in recent seasons I'd felt small and useless. I didn't have the political knowledge and craftiness of Kieran, or the strength and courage of Tristan. Our time in Hazor had only highlighted the

limits of my gifts. But in this moment, my calling had value. I could help in a way no one else here could.

With the aid of music, even the men calmed. Tristan kept Kendra supplied with clavo to sip, blotted the sweat from her face, and wrapped an extra blanket around her shoulders. Kieran and his son stayed out of sight but always in earshot in case we needed anything.

As the tempo of both birth pains and music increased, Tristan held Kendra and sang softly in her ear. At times she seemed barely aware of our presence, lost in a deep private struggle, but worry and fear remained at bay.

My fingers ached. My shoulders and arms grew sore and numb. Still I played and sang. Had all births taken this long? I struggled to remember. In the small, dim room, time became meaningless. My heart ached to ease Kendra's pain, and the words I sang pleaded for the One to protect her. In the recent seasons, she had become a dear friend—my only real friend in this foreign place. I couldn't face the thought of losing her.

At last, it was time to set aside my rondalin and help Kendra deliver her child. I summoned my memories from other births. The older women of Braide Wood said that in most cases babies knew their path. I hoped they were right.

When my music stopped, a muddle of other sounds took over the room. Ragged breaths, groans, nervous questions called from the outer room, murmured reassurances. Finally, in a flow of blood and water, a wrinkled, slippery baby emerged.

A girl.

Even as I worked to gather her safely, I laughed. She'd already subverted the predictions of her father. He'd been sure the baby would be a son.

I wrapped her in a soft blanket, rubbing her skin, coaxing sound from her tiny lungs.

The small bundle gave a surprised hiccup, then turned red-faced with a hearty squall. I handed her to Kendra and sank back on my heels, awestruck. Pure new life had burst into the world, and we were witnesses. Tears ran down my face, relief and joy mingling. I wished I could compose a brand new song to honor the infant's arrival, but at the moment her squawks were the most beautiful music I'd ever heard.

Kendra's arms encircled her child, and she nuzzled the top of her head as Tristan knelt beside her with his eyes glistening. Kendra pulled her focus away from the baby and reached a hand toward her husband. He pressed his forehead against hers. "She's beautiful."

"Her name is Emmi," Kendra said. Joy shone along with the sheen of moisture on her face. "And Tristan, do you realize what this means?"

"We're parents?" he answered, letting his daughter wrap her tiny perfect hand around his finger.

Kendra giggled. "Well, yes. That's the main thing. And now we can finally return home to the clans."

My heart sank. Hazor was about to become even more lonely.

