

The Restorer – Sword of Lyric Series Book 1

by Sharon Hinck

BONUS SCENES

1. After Chapter 1

Mark:

Jon and Anne galloped ahead of me down the sidewalk toward the park. Even with their much shorter legs, they left me puffing along in their wake.

Anne raced for the play equipment, the determination on her face a perfect reflection of Susan's when she was deep into some project. Susan claimed that Anne took after me, but I saw my wife's features in all our children. One of my constant, undeserved joys.

"I want the red swing," Anne shouted. "Push me, Daddy."

Jon veered off and climbed a slide, diving down it headfirst. "Dad, watch me!"

If I could let the kids burn off some energy without them getting any serious injuries and bring home tired but happy children, I'd be Susan's hero. I gave Anne a strong push, and she tossed her head back, laughing as the swing lifted her skyward.

No wonder Jon and Anne needed some time at the playground—our house was bursting at the seams. We'd talked off and on for years about finding a larger place. When Susan would mention a great fixer-upper she'd seen closer to church, or how much we needed an extra bathroom, I'd find reasons to wait—economic downturn, possible move to a new office, the close friendships our kids had with the neighbors. Sometimes she'd study me with a puzzled frown.

"It's more than that, isn't it?" she'd ask.

I'd shrug. "It's hard to explain."

And she'd give me that sweet, tender smile, probably thinking I hid a well of sentiment toward the house that I couldn't admit. Her guess was close enough to truth that I convinced myself I wasn't a liar. Besides, hiding the truth to protect the person you love isn't exactly lying, is it?

Even when I ran out of logical arguments for staying, she let me win the debate. With some clever remodeling projects and plenty of repairs, we managed. But my secrets ate at me. She assumed the best, ascribed pure—if slightly sappy—motives to my stubbornness about the house. She'd probably hate me if she learned the truth.

But what if my deception were contributing to the distance between us? In recent months, dark smudges had appeared beneath Susan's eyes, her shoulders had taken on a

weary slump, and her attention had begun wandering off mid-conversation. No question about it: Something was wrong.

Anne flung herself from the swing, tumbled in the sand, and came up laughing. “I’m hungry.”

Jon raced over and jumped up and down as if his sneakers were spring-loaded. “Me too.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. We just got here. Get some fresh air first. Then we’ll get burgers.” They both had the attention span of minnows, but I had to keep them occupied a little longer. Susan needed time to herself.

Fixing up the attic held some risks, but I would do anything to bring back her smile. Or maybe on a subconscious level, I needed to confront the secret in those storage boxes. After so many years I’d convinced myself the contents were a mere relic of a time I could barely remember. Under control. Safe. The last thing Susan would do with her precious down time would be to dig through a bunch of dusty boxes.

2. After Chapter 4

Tristan:

“She warned me.” I tossed back the last swig of clavo and wiped out the mug before tucking it away on a recessed shelf. Not that there was any real need to clean up. The place probably wouldn’t see another person for seasons to come. I was stalling, and I knew it.

Kieran leaned against the open doorway, squinting into the distance. “Who warned you of what?”

“My mother. She tried to stop me.”

“We all tried to stop you. You did what you had to.”

I slung my pack over one shoulder and met Kieran at the door. “She warned me that revenge wouldn’t change anything. She begged me to stay in Braide Wood.”

Kieran shook his head. “You’ve got new things to worry about. By the way, she headed toward the center of town.”

I sighed. Not the direction I needed to go. “Of course she did.” I followed Kieran outside and pulled the door closed.

“I still say you should leave her here and get back to Lyric for some damage control. The Council has probably figured out by now that you aren’t where you’re supposed to be.”

More regret slammed into me. I hadn’t cared about what my mother needed. I hadn’t cared about the guardians in my command. I hadn’t cared about anything but tracking the Rhusican. Every day I’d woken with desperate hope that tore my insides like a rizzid’s claws. Hope that confronting the Rhusican would bring me answers. Hope that justice would ease my pain. Hope that I’d be able to talk to the One again without shaking with rage. And now...now I just felt empty.

“Hey.” Kieran shoved me, a little too hard to be playful. “Stop it. Second guessing makes you weak.”

I swatted him aside and tightened my sword belt. “It’s not weakness to analyze my choices.”

“Choices? You didn’t have choices. You told me he attacked you.”

“He did. But it was still my sword that took his life. I could have—”

“Let him kill you?” Kieran spit the words out through a clenched jaw.

I took a step back. “What are you so mad at me for?”

“Because you’re an idiot. He did more than enough damage, but you insist on making it worse by torturing yourself.” Kieran raked a hand through his dark hair, haggard lines deepening on his face.

Another person I hadn’t considered. He’d been devastated too. My shoulders slumped. “I wish I could bring her back.”

Pain flashed in Kieran's eyes. He turned away and cleared his throat. "Go track down your protégé before she wanders into a clay pit. Although, come to think of it, that would solve a few problems." With a dry chuckle, he strode down the street, heading toward Hazor.

I shook my head, picked up the extra pack I'd assembled, and walked toward the center of town to find Susan. Unlike Kieran, I could dare to hope for a Restorer. After all, what else could explain what we'd both seen? Her crumpled, lifeless body had healed. Still, she seemed awfully small and confused to be of much help. If I were still on speaking terms with the One, I'd ask Him what her appearance meant. But for now I'd hope someone in Braide Wood could figure out what to do with her.

3. After Chapter 8

Tara:

When Tristan disappeared down the trail toward the healer's lodge, I hurried back into the house and pulled out crates of root vegetables and my favorite dried herbs. No skimping today. Tristan was home. He looked a little worse for wear, but he was home.

I hummed as I kneaded dough for some fresh rolls.

Lukyan had told me once that it didn't honor the One to indulge in constant worry for my children. "They belong to the One, and He has His hand in their lives." Easy for him to say. He'd never had children like Tristan, Talia, and Tagatha.

How could a mother not worry? Especially when a mother's love wasn't enough to keep danger and harm away from her children. Even a mother's fervent prayers didn't guarantee that her children would be spared suffering. If my prayers could have brought Kendra back and healed Tristan's broken heart, it would have happened a thousand times over by now.

Tristan had been gone so long that worry visited me daily—a guest I kicked out again and again, but one who kept knocking.

Of my three children, Tristan wasn't usually the one to keep me awake at night with worry. His work leading the guardians of Braide Wood was difficult and held some risks, but he was responsible, a strong leader, a man who inspired confidence and trust. It was my youngest who had caused me the most pain over the years. Little Tagatha had shocked me when she'd pledged herself to a man from Lyric and had chosen city life far from her family and clan. My happy mood faded as I thought of the grandchild I rarely saw because of her choices.

I reached overhead and pulled down some dried stalks of sogeno. Rubbing the leaves between my hands released their earthy scent, and I pummeled my dough until the herbs were blended well. There'd be time to worry about Tagatha later. Tristan was home—that was what I needed to focus on. Tristan and Kendra. It must have killed him to stay away from her so long.

Every few days I walked to the healer's lodge and tried to see Kendra, but the stubborn old healers wouldn't let me spend time with her. Too dangerous, they said. Pah. Families need each other. It was keeping them apart that was dangerous. Fortunately, Tristan was a lot bigger and carried a sword, and I suspected they wouldn't be able to keep him from seeing her.

Now what to do with the strange woman he'd brought with him? As thrilled as I was to see him, I didn't know what to think of her. A lost and desperate look haunted her eyes.

Well, whatever her problems, they could surely be helped with a hearty bowl of soup. I set my biggest bowl on the heat trivet and stuffed it with ingredients.

4. After Chapter 13

Kendra:

I was five when Kieran taught me Perish, barely old enough to remember not to pop the smooth stones into my mouth like a curious toddler. The patterns fascinated me. I loved pushing my white stones into place to block the attack of my brother's black ones. Imagining the scenarios the game represented were no problem for me. In my mind's eye, guardians rode forward to protect the clan and noble heroes sacrificed everything to beat back invasion.

No matter how quickly I moved, Kieran was quicker. I'd guard my village on one side, only to be attacked on the flank. My nimble fingers adjusted the placement faster and faster. Black and white pieces shuffled and reshuffled, but I couldn't clear the game.

Ever since the Rhusicat at Blue Knoll stared into my eyes, whispering doubt and confusion, I'd been caught in some sort of game of Perish. Move and countermove.

Anxieties advanced like black pebbles, tumbling, avalanching, burying me.

The clans were in danger. Someone needed to do something. *I* needed to do something. Yet the political issues were huge. I was powerless. Still, there had to be an answer. Faster. There wasn't time.

Tristan was taking too many risks. The River Borders were dangerous. But he wouldn't listen to me. I couldn't stop him. Yet I had to. I had to do more, or I'd lose him. He was taking too many risks. I pushed one thought aside looking for an answer but, like Perish rocks, another took its place, and the horrible circle continued.

From far away, the voice of a stranger interrupted the battle. "Be still and know..."

No time for that. If I stopped and listened, if I didn't stay focused on the pieces, they'd surround me. I had to organize the problems. Find solutions. Worry them into place.

"Be still and know..." The woman's gentle voice chanted a chorus I'd never heard before, but it felt familiar even in its strangeness. My body shuddered as I let the melody pull me from the worries I fought to contain.

"I am the Lord that healeth thee."

Beyond the thready tones of the woman's voice, I heard the voice of the One. How I longed to sink into that invitation. But if I didn't fix the Council and Tristan and the Kahlareans, and—

With a sweep of my arm, I flung the Perish stones aside, lashing out against the fear that demanded solutions I couldn't provide. A moan tore from the deep pain in my core. What had I done? I scrambled to regather the stones. One more time. I needed to try one more time. Maybe this time I could move the pieces into order and stop this chaos. The tortuous puzzle clamored. *Fix this. Solve it. Try harder.*

Another voice joined the woman's. Rough-edged and strong. I grew aware of arms that gathered me, supported me.

I'd thought my eyes were open as I watched the Perish stones, but now I opened them and saw his face.

"Tristan?"

A smile lit his features, hope and relief glimmering in his eyes. Frantic strands of anxiety still clung to the edges of my thoughts, but with each passing moment their grip loosened. Was this what it was like for those who closed their eyes in death but opened them in the presence of the One?

Joy built slowly, stretching and filling my mind, casting aside the stones of worry that had seemed so important, so heavy, so insistent. The joy tossed them aside as the pebbles they were. I was awake.

5. After Chapter 15

Nolan:

I grabbed the edge of the jagged wall and skidded into a quick turn on my way to the messenger's gathering room. The polished stone floors of Zarek's palace didn't provide much traction. My feet slipped, but I ran faster. Late again. My mother had been in so much pain that I'd risked an early morning errand to the market to bargain for a few drug patches. I had to slip into the room before Keeper Fentick began handing out the day's assignments. Maybe today would be one of the days he lumbered in late nursing a headache from a night of drinking.

Slowing to quiet my breathing, I ducked into the door and wedged myself among a group of other messengers. The mountain gods had deserted me today. Fentick was already dispensing assignments.

His bloodshot eyes found me instantly. "And finally, the generals have requested a messenger for a special task." The smirk that spread on his jowled face chilled me more than his usual snarls. "Nolan, pack two day's rations and report to the lehkan division. They're assembling at the gate."

My eyes widened. A military assignment? I was a city messenger.

"But his mother..." Arvon piped up from one of the tables. He was a young boy, recently sent from the Grey Hills province. I'd brought him home for a hot meal. He knew how hard I'd worked to protect my assignment in town so I could care for my mother. But he was too new to understand the danger in questioning Fentick.

"Yes, sir." I jumped forward, hoping to deflect attention.

Too late. Fentick trudged a few steps closer to the table and cuffed Arvon hard across the face. Arvon hit the floor and wisely stayed down.

Fentick looked around the room. "Any other questions? Good. To your places." He lumbered away without a backward glance.

Most of the messengers scattered. A few glanced my way as they sped out of the hall, but no one spoke to me.

I offered Arvon a hand. "Didn't I tell you to keep your head down and your mouth shut?"

He rubbed his chin. "So you did. I just thought if he knew about your mother he might keep you in the city."

I used to find the new messengers from the outer provinces a source of humor. All cheerful ignorance and belief that if they did their job well, they'd be rewarded. I smiled bleakly. "Nice try. But there is something you can do for me."

He nodded eagerly. "Glad to."

"If I'm not back in a week, let my mother know where I was sent."

He frowned. "A week? But Keeper Fentick said you're bringing two days' rations."

As soon as the keeper had barked his orders, I understood the implications. The cold knot in my gut threatened to unravel, but I couldn't let Arvon see my fear. "It's two days' ride to the mountain border. They're using me in a military campaign. That's two days to arrive and no days to return."

Arvon scratched his head. "They have food at the outposts?"

I sighed. "No. I won't need food. I'm not meant to return."

Comprehension dawned slowly across his face. "But you can't... Your mother... You..."

I clapped him on the back as we walked to the door. "Who knows? Maybe I'll be back before she has time to notice I'm gone. Now get to your assignment."

He nodded and tore off down the hall, but cast one last worried look back at me. I shooed him away and ran the other direction, choosing the shortest route to the city gate. I was tempted to detour past my mother's home, but I didn't dare keep the army waiting. Besides, worry would only worsen her health. I'd managed to hide my fear from Arvon, but I wasn't sure I could keep up my courage if I saw her.

Outside the gate, lehken pawed the rocky ground, some weighted down with armored soldiers and others carrying bulky loads of what looked like minitrans strapped to their backs. I wove through the men and reported to the general, who sent me to march with the foot soldiers. By the time the afternoon rains cooled us, we were deep in the dark mountains. I'd never traveled this far from the city.

A strange howl from a distant cliff set my heart pounding, and I edged a bit closer to the soldiers I was keeping step with. One of the men chuckled. "You think this is bad? Did they tell you where we're heading? Braide Wood." The hardened soldier shivered.

The name was the stuff of nightmares. The enemy so close to our border, stubbornly in the way of Hazor's expansion. Backward. Barbarian. Why would the general need a messenger at the borders? I scuffed along the rain-soaked slate on the trail. Maybe he needed me to send reports back to the king, and the two-days' rations was Fentick's idea of a bad joke.

Another howl rent the air, closer this time. Around me, the men's faces turned grim. A trickle of cold rain found its way past my collar, and I rubbed my arms, trying to warm myself.

When the sky darkened and we made camp, I resolved not to guess about my role anymore. I'd be given my orders when I was needed, and my imagination would just make the suspense worse. I only hoped Arvon would help my mother, because deep in my heart I knew that there wasn't much chance I'd survive this assignment.

6. After Chapter 21

Wade:

The transport pulled out, and I caught a glimpse of Susan's face through the window. Terror creased her brow. The fear in her eyes was almost worse than when Tristan had first introduced her to us at Ferntwine. I paced. When would the next transport arrive? The schedule would be off because of the Council guard commandeering it.

Finally, I settled onto a tree stump, got out my whetstone, and sharpened my blade. Tristan drummed it into all of us that the simple disciplines made a guardian effective. The stone scraped along steel in a comforting rhythm.

Straightforward dangers are fine. It's why I became a guardian. Innocent people need defending. I certainly don't have the brains to be a builder or transtech, or the leadership to be on the Council, or the ear to hear from the One like the songkeepers. Put a sword in my hand and point me in the right direction—that's all I need. But in the last few seasons, the situation in the clans had grown as muddy as the clay pits near Shamgar.

Turning my sword, I worked the second edge. First Tristan had disappeared and the Council had started asking questions. Then Susan had come along, igniting questions about Restorers—an idea partly exciting but mostly confusing, especially since she wasn't what the clans needed and didn't at all fit the sort of protector that the One promised.

Then more Rhusicans were allowed to roam about the clans. As if Kendra's experiences weren't warning enough. And somehow, one of them had even gotten his twisted fingers into my skull. I shivered and lifted my sword, sighting down the edge. Still straight and true. At least my sword was reliable.

Sometimes it seemed like the whole world was shaking to its very foundations. Too much going wrong in too many ways. And today one of the Council Guard had taken the Braide Wood Records. His explanation about consolidating them in Lyric hadn't calmed Lukyan. I'd never seen the old songkeeper that upset before. I had run to warn Tristan, but that had only led Case and the others to him. Now Tristan had given me one simple task, and I'd already failed.

The sky moved toward a midday glow before the next transport pulled up. I bounded on board. I would have gotten out and pushed if my efforts would have helped move it faster. But I eventually reached the Lyric stop. The next challenge was to figure out where Case had brought Susan once they'd reached Lyric. They'd said the Council wanted to meet with her, so I strode quickly to the Council tower. I needed someone like Kieran. He could talk people in circles and confuse them enough to get past.

One of the Council guards was someone I'd trained with when I was a first-year, so I decided on a direct approach. "Well met! Haven't seen you in a while. How has your posting in Lyric been treating you?"

He didn't relax from his stiff posture at the door, but he grinned. "Not bad. How is everything back in Braide Wood? What brings you to Lyric?"

"An assignment from my captain. I need to find Case. Have you seen him?"

He gave a tight nod. "Yesterday. He's here often. Haven't seen him today, though."

"All right. Thanks. Maybe someone inside can help me." I squeezed past him without waiting for an answer.

Every time I'd been in the Council tower, my collar felt too tight and my boots too dusty. I ignored the slickly dressed, important-looking people moving along the halls and made my way to the Braide Wood council office.

No one had heard of Susan or the orders to bring her to Lyric. And the junior council member who talked to me made me feel like I was an annoyance who was wasting her time. Why couldn't I have been given a straightforward assignment? Like patrolling the River Borders with Dylan.

Thinking of Dylan reminded me of Linette. She spent a lot of time in Lyric, preparing for the large Gatherings. She might have what I needed—some wisdom about my next step. I headed for the worship tower.

Lukyan would be proud of me. When I was a pup, he used to smile and tell us all, "When in doubt, go to the One." I sure hoped the One, or at least his songkeeper, would have an idea about where I should look next.

7. After Chapter 24

Cameron:

Below my window, bedraggled people from a variety of clans made their way toward the tower. Drumbeats carried from the end of the street. I would normally put in my appearance along with other prominent leaders. But everyone's preoccupation with the gathering provided a perfect time to begin my greatest project—transforming the records. I turned to Medea. "Wait here."

She nodded vacantly, tracing her hands along the smooth limestone wall of my office, staring at something I couldn't see. Had she heard me? Lately, I was often uncertain. While she possessed the power and brilliance of a hundred magchips, she was also as unreliable as a shorting connection. Rationality flickered on and off and in her, but that only added to my fascination. Besides, my plans relied on her help, and her abilities were breathtaking to watch.

I shook my head and hurried down to the lower levels. All the more reason to make the changes to the records. That alone would finally free me to pursue my agenda to strengthen the clans.

Our clans were stuck—trapped—by extreme adherence to the outdated Records that kept us from competing with the nations around us in weapons' progress. If those stubborn old songkeepers were more willing to compromise, I wouldn't have had to take such drastic steps. Surely the One who watched our clans also understood my choices. After all, He had appointed the Council to protect the people, and that's exactly what I was doing.

My heart pounded against my temples as I made my way down the dark hall to the hiding place. So close at last. Seasons of planning and effort, and finally my greatest achievement as Chief Councilmember was within my grasp. I paused to be sure no footsteps echoed on the stairs behind me. No one was following. I brought up the lightwall and stepped toward the alcove.

Empty.

Fear wrapped insidiously into my thoughts. Could the old stories be true? Were the Records really linked to the One's tangible presence in some way? Had He taken back the Records I'd so carefully collected?

I choked back a laugh. Ridiculous. I forced my pulse to slow to match the throbbing drums that murmured in the distance. There was only one explanation, and it wasn't a supernatural one. Tristan.

He'd been in Braide Wood when my men had arrived to take the records. He would have understood the implications. But would he have dared to disobey the Council's orders for him to report to the River Border? Angry as I was at the missing Records, grim satisfaction built in my chest. Tristan didn't deserve to be a guardian. I'd tried to prove that to the Council, but each effort had failed. But if he'd ignored their

direct orders, I'd finally have what I needed to destroy him. Especially when combined with the evidence that addle-witted Susan had provided.

I took the stairs two at a time and rushed back into my office.

Medea spun slowly in the center of the room, her chin tilting up and hair spilling down her back. Her skirt flared around her ankles as she turned again and again.

"We have a problem," I said.

She kept spinning, but a smile lit her face. "Oh, good. Puzzles are lovely."

I touched her shoulder, and she slowed, finishing her turn to face me. "The Records are gone," I said. "But we can use this. I'll need your help at the Council meeting. Are you ready?"

She pulled a dagger from her boot sheath and smiled. "I'm very ready."

8. After Chapter 26

Rokkel, a first-year Council delegate of Rendor:

“Blessed first light.” A common greeting, but the guard at the entrance of the Council tower said it with a smirk.

I blushed. Was my eagerness that apparent? Sure, I’d arrived at the tower only moments after the darkness had lifted, but I’d worked hard for my shoulder emblems, and I was one of the youngest women to serve Rendor in the Council. So why did my fight to earn respect feel never-ending?

I gave a quick nod and hurried along the curving hall to the Rendor office. No one else had arrived yet, and some of my excitement deflated. I’d hoped for a few moments with Jorgen—a chance to impress him with my dedication. Perhaps then he’d invite me to sit in on more of the Council sessions. While some councilmembers found the procedures tedious, I enjoyed the subtle jockeying for power, the veiled double meanings, the skill needed to sway decisions. One day soon, Jorgen might even allow me to speak for our clan.

When he did sweep into the room, it was with a crowd of staff and apprentices. So much for my chance to impress. He clapped my shoulder and offered a hearty, “Well met,” as he moved across the room, but he was deep in a conversation with an older councilmember.

I waited, uncertain, at the fringes of the group. Fragments of conversation rose and fell about the Records, and some meetings held the day before. Meetings that I hadn’t been included in. Again. Would I never move out of my junior role? I needed to find a way to contribute, to show my worth. I edged closer to Jorgen.

Before I could jump into the conversation, the doors opened again. A woman I’d never seen before approached Jorgen as if he were an old friend. She was almost old enough to be my mother, so her words came as an extra shock. “I am grateful for your sponsorship and am happy to serve you as an apprentice councilmember.”

I gasped. A new apprentice? Now? Why? Had Jorgen lost trust in his other apprentice councilmembers? Bewildered, I backed away and bumped into a young, blond woman who had entered with them.

She smiled. “Well met. I’m Linette from Braide Wood. Wade and I are giving testimony today.”

Braide Wood? Why were they waiting in our Rendor office? I’d ask someone, “but I didn’t want to appear uncertain. Jorgen taught that confidence was an important quality in a councilmember. Of course it would help if I had the sort of brilliant mind, strength of character, and leadership skills that he had.

The signaler sounded, and we filed in. At least the newcomers sat in the back row. My hard-won place wasn’t being usurped. Yet. Now if only the strange woman behind me would stop whispering. If she understood so little about how the council worked, why

had Jorgen allowed her the honor of attending? I'd studied for six seasons before I was allowed to enter this hall.

A sad case brought by a widow drew my attention back to the floor. She accused a guardian of murdering her husband. My stomach soured. Could it be true? Not just any guardian, either, but Tristan of Braide Wood.

A blur of movement interrupted the compelling testimony. The new apprentice. She pushed her way to the railing and shouted, "Wait! You don't have all the information."

Over the uproar throughout the Council chamber, Landon demanded her identity.

"I'm Susan of Braide Wood," she answered with surprising spirit.

Why was she speaking from our Rendor clan balcony? Shock held me immobile. Jorgen would be furious.

For some inexplicable reason, Chief Councilmember Cameron invited her to the floor. So much for the value of procedure and decorum. She was making a mockery of our ancient and beautiful system of law.

The widow was speaking again, and my brain felt foggy, thoughts moving through sludge. What was wrong with me? I needed to concentrate. Jorgen often questioned us during breaks about the proceedings and our analysis. What if he asked me about this case? I had to be ready. But I couldn't follow the words flying around the hall.

Then Susan asked us to recite the Verses. How could anyone from the clans not know our basic truth? By habit, the words passed from my lips. Jorgen pressed his fists into the rail before him and began to sing in true, sonorous tones. My mind cleared. New strength and resolve swelled in my chest.

The widow's demeanor shifted. Rage contorted her face. She ran toward Susan, and a dagger caught an edge of light as the widow plunged the blade downward into Susan's unprotected heart.

Chaos broke out in each balcony, and we all ushered out to our Rendor office. The sacred Council had been desecrated before my eyes.

I hugged the wall, watching as Markkel guarded his wife's body. I wanted to cry, but shock held me in a cold paralysis. Not even a tear could break free.

A hand touched my shoulder firmly. "Rokkel, we continue. We always continue." Jorgen's deep voice shook me loose, and I managed a wobbly nod. He hardened his jaw. "Now, more than ever, there are decisions to make."

He led our councilmembers back into the hall. For once, my feet dragged. Would our Council ever feel like a sacred space again? I barely listened as representatives debated the Rhusic presence among the clans. My mind strayed to the new apprentice who now lay dead in the outer office. Dead. Killed here, in the Council chamber before my eyes. I struggled to keep my face stern, serene, the face of a councilmember, but inside I screamed.

How could they continue yammering after what they'd just seen? How could Jorgen seem confident that the Council could still reach wise decisions? Why had the One allowed such a horrible event in our sacred Council? Nothing would ever be the same again.

At long last, Landon called for a break. I bolted through the door, and my eyes slid to the place on the floor where I expected to see Susan's corpse. Instead, she was standing. Pale, but very much alive. Alive!

Of all the shocks of the day, this one was the greatest of all. After so many seasons of watching and waiting, the One had sent a new Restorer!

A quiet joy built behind my ribs. Disillusionment fell off my shoulders. The next session was going to be history-making. And I would be there to see it all.

9. After chapter 32

Linette:

In the pale glow of first light, families gathered slowly in unnatural silence. Even the youngest children stepped with muted tread, as if a misstep or snapped twig would bring instant destruction down on them. No begging to run off and play, no complaints about a delay in breakfast, no teasing of siblings. Fear strangled the breath from everyone.

I shivered and wrapped my cloak more tightly around my shoulders as I waited under towering pines in the center of the village. Lukyan hobbled up the path from his home, gray and haggard. He'd led the spiritual life of Braide Wood with an inner strength that usually belied his age. Whatever small well of courage I'd held onto drained away at the sight of his trembling, frail steps.

I hurried to meet him and offered my arm. His weight dragged heavily on my elbow, but he lifted his chin.

"Ah, everyone has come. Isn't that good?"

I managed a wobbly smile. "You always longed to see people this eager to call on the One."

He patted my arm. "This was a wise plan. Will you lead us in a morning song?"

Fear and grief tightened in a chokehold around my throat. I tried to muster a confident assent. Instead the words I wanted to hide spilled forth in a desperate whisper. "I can't do this. I can't sing. Not now. I can't strengthen their hearts when mine..."

When mine had died. Dylan was gone.

I hadn't even been able to wrap his body. I had no cairn to decorate. All I had was Tristan's stark report, the words that changed everything. My world stopped that day in Lyric. Everyone else kept moving. Transports continued to run. Guardians trained and prepared. People whispered about danger. The threat to our clan held everyone in rapt, frantic focus in recent days. But to me it was all a distant fog.

Even if Hazor overran Braide Wood, could I really hurt any more than I already did? Some small part of me would welcome an enemy syncbeam piercing the place where my heart used to beat.

Lukyan's eyes squinted with compassion. "This will be the most difficult gift you have yet given the One. And so the most precious."

But a morning song? So full of joy and praise. A celebration of hope? I shook my head. "I thought I could...maybe later..."

"Have the Verses ceased being true?"

"Of course not, but—"

"When we face the deepest pain and most dire threat, we most need to look into His face. Linette, just look into His face and help us all see Him this morning."

Families had stepped closer. I felt their eyes on me as I stared at the rocky ground. Not far away, lehkan troops rode resolutely to confront the enemy at Morsal Plains. Susan, separated from her loved ones, rode with the guardians, ready to lay down her life.

Deep in the woods, Kendra and Kieran and their father were setting up their disruptor, hoping their hard work of the past days would make a difference. This might be the last morning that all of us would meet here in Braide Wood.

I had no courage, no strength to offer them. But Lukyan was right: I could at least look in the right direction and encourage them to do the same.

As if I were in the vaulted Lyric tower, I lifted my face and stared upward. Tree branches gave way to an eternity of soft light. I drew a breath and sang.

*Giver of life, Designer of beauty
Precious are days, granted by You.
First light invites us to walk in Your mercy
Steps full of joy, Your blessings are true.*

The first lines were slow and barely audible, forced past the choking knot in my throat. But by the end of the verse, a warm whisper of voices gathered together and lifted the melody with me. The song was so familiar that even the youngest children were able to join in. We continued singing, and Lukyan stopped leaning on me for support.

A gasp filled the silence between lines, and I spared a glance down. Soft mist gathered and surrounded us. The voices around me grew stronger. Perhaps mine did too. The pain still throbbed through me, but a stubborn, precious grain of joy burst open as well. The mist surged, moving among and over the people, touching us all with more intensity than even the mists in the Lyric tower.

Dylan's death had crushed me. Impending death terrified us all. Yet the breath of the One was in the mist, and it reminded me that even beyond death there was hope and life.

With another deep breath, I drew that life into my lungs, into my being, and lifted my face to the sky again to sing.