

# *The Restorer's Journey* – Sword of Lyric Series Book 3

by Sharon Hinck

## **BONUS SCENES**

### After Chapter 1

#### DELETED/ALTERNATE SCENE

*Note to readers: Here's a somewhat disorienting look at the same chapter through Susan's eyes instead of Jake's. In my earliest drafts, I opened the book this way, but felt it didn't give enough introduction to Jake's primary story.*

### Alternate Chapter 1

Susan:

The windows reflected translucent images of our dining room, layered over deep black voids. Wispy curtains framed the two casements.

I used to like the delicate gauze. Now I longed for heavy shades instead—to shut out the menace of the night beyond the glass. Our home no longer felt safe.

The destruction in the kitchen didn't hurt me too deeply. We swept up the broken dishes, mopped the floor, and made a list of shattered items to replace.

The china cabinet full of teacups was another story. It had been smashed with a chair—an act that spoke of malicious intent. I couldn't absorb that much hate directed toward us. Frozen, I stared at the glass shards jutting from the broken cabinet door. A shiver snaked along my spine.

Mark jogged past me to get another garbage bag from the hall closet. He slowed down long enough to give me a comforting squeeze. "Honey, Jake is alive. Nothing else matters."

After weeks of hunting for Jake on the other side of the portal, we'd rescued him. Unfortunately, our enemies had followed us. They used their control over Jake to distract us and slipped into our world ahead of us.

"We all got back safe," Mark leaned his head against mine. "This is just a piece of furniture."

Just a piece of furniture we bought as a wedding gift to each other twenty years ago. Just a collection of teacups scavenged from countless summers of poking through garage sales together.

My knuckles swiped at the moisture on my face. "I know that, all right?" I didn't mean to snap at him.

He was right. It was a miracle we had made it home. A little property damage shouldn't hurt me like this. Having two powerful enemies set loose in our world was a much bigger problem. We had no idea what they intended to do, but I knew enough about Cameron and Medea to know we had to stop them.

Cameron was one of the most powerful men in Lyric. He'd gained power in the capital city faster than any politicians I knew. In his grasp for ever more control, he saw morality as an inconvenient restraint. He even allied himself with a Rhusican woman, Medea. Her skill at controlling the minds of others gave him a huge advantage.

My stomach lurched at the memory of how she had snared my thoughts. I turned quickly back to sweeping up the floor.

Cameron and Medea on our side of the portal. Stumbling out our door to the quiet neighborhood of Ridgeview Drive. I almost didn't blame them for grabbing some food and supplies from our kitchen. Anyone confronted with an alien world deserved sympathy. But the damage they had caused on their rampage through our home was designed to send us a message.

We had enemies.

I picked up a Delft saucer, smashed beyond repair, and laid the pieces gently into the garbage bag. Mark came in and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "I can fix the cabinet. That splintered door will need to be replaced, but the other one just needs new hinges. I can put in new glass." Despite the danger to our family, his eyes lit at the thought of a woodworking project.

I had to smile.

"Pizza's here!" Jake shouted from the kitchen. No one in our neighborhood used the front door. Delivery guys knew to tap on our kitchen door. I was glad we had most of the debris picked up before he arrived. Mark went to pay him, and I cleared Legos off the coffee table in the living room.

Our son Jake was taking everything in stride. Nothing could faze him if there was plenty of food around.

I shook my head. "Pizza at eleven at night." I handed paper napkins to Jake and Mark. "We better save a few pieces for the other kids."

Karen was spending the night with her friend, Amanda. They were both enjoying the freedom of shiny new driver's licenses, and had gone to a movie, and then to Amanda's for a sleepover. Jon and Anne were visiting my mom, and she had happily tucked them in sleeping bags when we called to apologize for getting home later than we expected. If my grade-schoolers noticed the pizza box in the garbage tomorrow, their outrage would last all day. Pizza was a rare treat, and they hated to miss anything. What would they think if they knew about the other things they had missed? This had certainly been the strangest Saturday our Mitchell household had ever experienced.

Jake popped open his third can of Dr. Pepper. No wonder he was still wide awake. "So what do we tell the kids?" he asked.

Now that he was out of high school, he didn't include himself in that term. Eighteen was a heady age. "We could say there was a burglar, but then they'd want to help the police solve the case and they'd never stop asking questions."

He was right. Jon and Anne loved the detective kits they got last Christmas, and I didn't want to arouse their snooping instincts.

Mark tore a piece of crust from his slice of pepperoni. "If we finish cleaning everything up, I don't think they'll pay much attention. The cabinet is the only obvious damage. If they ask, we'll just say it got bumped and fell." He rested his piece of pizza on the cardboard box and looked at me. "Do we need to warn them?"

"Warn them?" I had to mumble around a mouth full of melted cheese.

"In case Cameron and Medea come back." His voice was calm, but I suddenly had a hard time swallowing.

"You think they'll come back?" Jake's baritone went up in pitch and he set his can of pop on the coffee table. I slipped a napkin under it to blot up the circles of condensation.

Mark didn't answer for a moment. "It depends on why they came. If they plan to stay in our world, we'll need to find them—stop them from whatever damage they want to cause. But it's more likely Cameron wants to bring back things he can use in Lyric. And that means they'll be back to use the portal."

I sank into the couch and looked out the living room windows. I could see a streetlight from this angle, and the shimmer of Mark's car parked on the street. They might be out there, too. They could be watching us even now.

"I'll get extra locks tomorrow. Maybe look into an alarm system." Mark believed every problem could be solved with his Home Depot credit card.

"And shades," I said.

"What?"

"We need some window shades."

He nodded his agreement then turned to Jake. "Can you remember more about your conversations with Cameron? What did he ask you about? What did he seem interested in?"

A shudder moved through Jake's thin frame.

I gave Mark a worried glance, then rested a hand on Jake's arm. "It's okay, honey. We don't have to talk about it right now." I smoothed Jake's hair back from his face.

He didn't meet my eyes. "No problem." He sprawled back on the couch, studying the ceiling. "It just seems like it was all a dream."

"What's the last thing you remember clearly?" Mark leaned forward and watched Jake closely.

"Braide Wood." He smiled and closed his eyes. "It reminded me of summer camp. And I was so tired of running and hiding in caves. I finally felt safe. Tara fussed over me, and I taught Dustin and Aubrey how to play soccer. It felt like home."

I sighed and settled deeper into the couch. That was exactly how I felt about Braide Wood, too. Yes, there were llama-furred lehkan on the plateau near the village. Clavo, a

clove-scented tea was the common drink. Blue ferns grew under the trees, and orberries grew in clusters under gnarled spice trees. Yet for all the strangeness, it was a familiar place—Tristan’s family gathering around the table, suppertime conversations, soft pallets that felt wonderful after a hard day. Friends.

Jake shifted. “I went to see Morsal Plains with Tara. It was really sad. The grain was all black and it smelled weird. Tara told me about the attack. How Hazor poisoned it on purpose and how the Restorer led the army in battle to protect Braide Wood.” Jake squinted his eyes open and looked sideways at me. Then he shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

I didn’t blame him. What teenage boy could absorb the image of his mom riding into battle with a sword? I had lived it, and still found it hard to believe.

“Anyway, we got back to Tara’s house, and some guys came to take me to Cameron. He made a big fuss over me. Said it was his job to welcome guests to the clans. He apologized that I’d run into such bad company but said he’d make it up to me. He gave me something to drink, and then he took me into a room and there was a lady there.”

Jake’s hormone-driven admiration played across his face. “She was amazing.” He frowned in concentration. “But I can’t remember everything we talked about. I just remember she made me feel important. She treated me like I wasn’t just some teenage kid. It was...” He pulled himself up and angled away from us. “I finally realized that no one else had ever really understood me.” Jake’s jaw tightened. “I wanted to become a Guardian. I had an important job to do.”

“Jake.” Mark’s voice was sharp and startled me. “Listen carefully. The woman you met was a Rhusican. They have the power to poison minds. Your mom and I have fought their influence before. Don’t trust everything you’re feeling right now.”

Jake slowly turned his head to look at us, and I saw the struggle in his eyes. We had broken the hold of a strong vine of influence Medea had woven into his mind, but not all the tendrils were pruned away yet. I reached out to lay my hand over his on the couch, hoping he wouldn’t pull away. “They used you to find the portal. She doesn’t really understand you.” His hand felt cold and limp under mine and I struggled to find a way to help him. “Remember my favorite Psalm?”

His face bent in a tight grin. “How could I forget? You made us learn the whole thing one summer. ‘O Lord, you have searched me and you know me...’ blah, blah, blah.”

Despite his flippant tone, I saw the words take hold.

“What’s the rest?” Mark feigned ignorance, although I knew his memory was keener than both Jake and I combined.

“You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.” Jake rattled off the words by rote, but some of the stiffness eased from his spine as he said the last words.

“Sounds like there is someone who understands you a lot better than Cameron and Medea.” Mark stood up and tousled Jake’s hair. “Remember that.” Then he yawned widely. “Let’s get some sleep.”

I would have liked to keep talking with Jake, to reassure myself that he wasn't slipping back into dark thoughts. Instead, I took my cue from Mark and gathered up the pizza box and pop cans to carry them out to the kitchen.

Mark slipped up behind me as I wrapped foil around the leftovers. "What did you miss the most?" he asked.

I turned and smiled up at him, finally letting myself savor the wonderful feeling of being home. Danger might prowl just beyond the kitchen door but I was in Mark's arms, in our house, and in our own world again. "The kids. Books. Tennis shoes. Hot bubble baths."

He laughed. "Let me take a quick shower first, and then the bathroom is all yours. You can soak as long as you want."

It was long after midnight when Mark and I snuggled into our bed. I curled up close to him and nestled my face against the flannel of his pajama-clad shoulder. I was drifting toward sleep when his voice startled me.

"We'll have to decide tomorrow," he said.

"Hmm?"

"The best thing to do. If we hide the stones they won't be able to go back."

The fear of Cameron and Medea lurking in the shadows made me pull the quilt up over my nose. "We don't want them running around our world. They don't belong here," I said.

"I guess we'll just have to send them back, but without anything that would hurt the People of the Verses."

"No problem," I murmured, already sinking toward sleep. I should be helping him worry this out, but I was too exhausted.

"And what about Jake?"

I struggled to open my eyes a slit. "Hmm?"

"You saw what happened." Yes, I'd seen. Jake had cut his hand while cleaning the kitchen, and it had healed instantly. The sign of the Restorer. "We need to keep the portal available in case he's needed there. But how will we know?" Mark's chest rumbled under my ear as he talked. Usually I was the one wanting to continue a discussion. Why had my husband decided to get chatty now, when I was so tired?

I let my eyelids droop, just resting them for a minute.

Some time later I realized Mark was still talking, but I'd missed most of it.

"...and we'll take advantage of the time to give him some sword training. We'll just have to stay alert," he was saying.

"Yes, dear," I mumbled, and fell sound asleep.

## After Chapter 2

Medea:

Shelves crawled up the walls of the small shop, full of strange items I didn't recognize and didn't care to learn about. Cameron scowled at the lumpy man behind the counter, so I stepped closer. He obviously needed my help—as he had each moment in this strange place. Delicious warmth rose in my chest. Having this powerful man dependent on me was intoxicating.

Of course, he was just using me. Again. But at least Cameron was entertaining. Few people had such wonderful threads of darkness to explore. Most were dull vacant husks of basic desires and simple fears. Like the oafish shopkeeper who kept shaking his head.

“Sir, you need to show me your permit to carry. And then you'll have a waiting—”

“We don't want to wait.” My words poured like thick liquid, rich as lehen blood. The man's eyes glazed. His thoughts froze, and I slipped through them and around them. There it was. Greed. Child's play. So easy to work with. “Think of all the sales you might lose if you don't help this important man. You'll do anything to give him what he needs.”

Not even a flicker of resistance.

He didn't speak, but lumbered to one of his crowded racks and pulled out the long, clumsy tool that Cameron was so obsessed with possessing today. Cameron stuffed it into his sack, along with the small heavy boxes that the shopkeeper pulled from behind his counter. Strange symbols traced across the box, the same strange symbols littering everything in this cluttered world. Unimportant.

We left the shop and the light assaulted us again. Searing. Brilliant. A thousand lightwalls closing in on us.

Cameron steered me down the street toward the place we'd taken lodging. “I wish you could teach me how to do that,” he said.

“So do I.”

Then I wouldn't need to be in this hateful place. As we walked along the street, noises welled together. Chaotic fragments of music. The clamor of odd-colored transports. The constant dull buzz of machines. Apparently these people couldn't produce heat, light, or movement without all this noise. My head throbbed. I stopped, squeezing my eyes shut.

Cameron shifted his bag over his other shoulder and took my arm. “Is it worse? Did that last encounter drain you?”

I wafted a hand through the air. “Don't insult me. It's the light. And the speed.” Everyone rushing. Sounds jabbing at my brain.

He drew me off the busy street and into a city park. Only a few trees and the prickly, violently-green coating over the soil and a few stone benches. Nothing like the nurturing

beauty of Rhus. Not even as peaceful as the tiny parks in Lyric. But a place to catch my breath.

A hideous creature slithered up a tree trunk, then back down, in haphazard patterns. Cameron said the animals—squirrels?—were harmless, but their faces held menace, and they moved too much like rizzids. I tensed whenever I spotted one, expecting it to sink razor-sharp teeth into me, injecting its poison.

I grabbed Cameron's arm. "This whole place is poisoning me. Take me back. Now."

Cameron led me to a bench in the shade. "Rest first. Then we'll talk."

I leaned forward, running my hands over the soft fabric of the dress we'd taken from one of the many shops we'd explored in the past weeks... or was it years? "How long have we been here? Can we sit here until the rains? I want to feel the rain."

His sigh was heavy as he took my hand. "They don't have rain every day. Remember?"

Why bother remembering insignificant things like weather? The longer we lingered in this horrible place, the more my thoughts scampered away to hide or spun in dizzying circles. Nicco had warned me. At least I thought he had. Unless my memories were jumbled again. Nicco never understood how valuable my alliance with Cameron would be for Rhus. Now I couldn't remember why, either. My head hurt. "You have enough weapons. It's time to go back."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

Not another change in plans. I was slipping. Another reminder I needed to get home to Rhus. He'd never been able to hide his thoughts from me before. But I'd been so distracted, coping with the irritations of this place, I'd missed the subtle shifts in his mood, his energy, his focus. I met his eyes, ready to intrude, to bend his will, to let him know exactly what I required of him.

He quickly held up his hands. "Wait. Think about it. We've already proven we can control the clans. Imagine what we could do here."

I sprang from the bench. "And our arrangement? If you aren't back in the Council leading the clans, how will you send Rhus what we agreed?"

"I've given my best years to those ignorant, backward people. They refuse every attempt at progress. Why don't we leave it all behind and start fresh. Here. Together."

A shrill laugh broke from my throat. "So you can become a king over this ugly world and I—" No. He couldn't know. He knew I suffered when away from Rhus too long. But I couldn't allow him the power of knowing the rest.

I stepped back, and the horrible light from the sky found me, searing me with its unnatural vibrancy. I clutched my temples, stumbling forward to the cool stone bench again. "It's a fine idea," I choked out. "You're meant for bigger things."

His chest lifted and he leaned back, surveying the park and streets beyond as if he already owned them. "Exactly. This is only the beginning." He patted the lumpy bag at his feet.

“You deserve to lead people who will respect you. Fear you.” Unlike my conversation with the shopkeeper, this time my words were as soft as a caress. Direct assault rarely worked with Cameron. Instead I gave a barely perceptible nudge. Ultimately he would change direction. He would never know I had influenced him. I leaned against him and smiled sweetly. “But first, you deserve your revenge on Markkel and Susan for all the trouble they caused you.”

I watched the new suggestion rush through the tangled branches of his soul, felt it soak into the deepest roots of hatred. Recognition lit his face. “Of course. Now that I have weapons, we should go back to their home.”

“Today? So soon?” I widened my eyes. “That’s a beautiful idea.”

By the time we reached their home, he would decide his original plan was too important to abandon. I’d get back to Rhus, and Cameron would tear his people apart clan by clan to supply what we needed.

After chapter 6

Mark:

Dust floated uncaring from the rafters. I reached my arm toward the empty space where my son had stood seconds before. Gone.

My heart pounded, sending a jarring pulse against my broken ribs. I grabbed the nearest portal stone, shifted its position, and realigned it with the others. No subtle vibration, no tingling tug of the portal, no hint of life. I picked up the others. The stones were dead weight in my hands.

I'd been ready to die in the effort to reach Susan—but not for this. Shut out, facing horrible emptiness. And now Jake was gone, too.

“No!” The cry tore open my cut lip and I tasted blood. I crumpled to the plywood floor. Bones grated. Bruises throbbed. But the pain was nothing compared to the raw horror in my soul.

For weeks I'd contemplated destroying the portal stones, and then worked on ways to alter or control them. Anything to keep Cameron and Medea from returning to harm the clans. Even after Cameron and Medea invaded our house, I thought by purposely misaligning the stones I could hinder them. After they surprised me and dragged Susan with them, Jake had to snap me out of my shock. We formed another new plan. And now I faced another disaster.

Jake was gone, too. Lost, unreachable. In danger. Like Susan.

Susan's journal rested on the chair we'd set up for her quiet refuge. It seemed years ago that she'd smiled at me, thanking me again and again for building this space, for finding some tangible way to help her with her inner pain. I inched toward it. My Council tunic caught on a nail head, and I tugged it free. I'd love to tear the entire thing apart, along with all the choices that had led to this moment. Instead I picked up her journal and hugged it against my chest. “Lord, bring her back to me.” The longing was so deep, I could only whisper the words.

I gently set the journal back on her chair. Time to find a solution.

First, I tried every improbable trick I could think of to activate the portal. Placing the old plastic sword between the stones produced no reaction. Tossing a ball across the space triggered nothing. Stepping in and out of the space and re-positioning the portal stones again and again did nothing.

Next, I brought the stones down to my basement workbench and pulled out my tools. I tinkered for hours, looking for clues in the hidden mechanisms that could bring them back to life. My worries swung between Susan and Jake. At least when Jake went through the portal, the stones weren't misaligned. And he wasn't in the company of Cameron and Medea. What was Susan going through?

Hours later, I rubbed my eyes, as my tools and the workbench slipped in and out of focus. My whole body was one throbbing ache, and now I was swaying on my feet from exhaustion. I took the stones and a sleeping bag back up to the attic. In the past, our sojourns through the portal had taken little time in this world. Susan and Jake could return at any moment. Or perhaps they'd be able to send a message somehow. Until they did, I needed to stay close. I unrolled the sleeping bag and curled up, ears straining for any hopeful sound. If I couldn't sleep beside my wife, at least I'd sleep beside this fragile link that I had to her.

As the darkness settled around me, my desperate hope provided cold comfort.

## After Chapter 11

Wade:

The path from Braide Wood to the transport was rock-strewn and hard under my feet. Usually the sounds of small creatures created happy whispers throughout the woods. Today the silence was as cold as angry lips pressed together. Even the trees seemed to droop. So much had changed since Cameron became king.

I reached a familiar bend in the trail and rubbed the scars on my arm. Each time I strode past this place, I remembered the night the bear attacked our small group. A grin broke through my gloom. Now that was an enemy I knew how to fight.

Give me a bear over Council politics any day. I could carry a heavy load, or swing a sword long after everyone else tired. But the planning, the strategies, the heavy choices I'd seen Tristan have to make...those weren't for me. These days, strength, courage, and loyalty were no longer enough. I wanted to help Jake, but was this the best way to do it? Would he be safe back at camp with the group of suspicious guardians? I wanted to serve the clans, but was it right to keep our men together secretly when the king had ordered the guardians disbanded? The questions baffled me.

I hitched up my sword belt and clambered over a fallen tree branch in the path. Sorting out the answers was better left to smarter men. Yet here I was, on my way to skulk around the city of Lyric. Again. When Cameron's men grabbed Susan from Braide Wood that first season, Tristan sent me to protect her. I spent days prowling the back alleys of Lyric, asking questions in a way that I'd hoped was subtle, and poking around dark underground rooms.

When I finally caught up to Susan, I accidentally walloped Markkel over the head. That's what comes of sending a simple guardian to deal with complicated plots. He'd eventually warmed up to me. Even asked me to be his house protector. The weight of my pack lightened. I lengthened my stride. Markkel's family needed my protection. That much was clear.

When I reached the transport stop, I gazed up and down the tarred road. With so many other changes in our clans, I couldn't assume anything. If they were no longer running, I'd have a hike of many days to reach Lyric. I paced the paved road, listening to the glum silence while I waited.

Thankfully, the midday transport glided up before the afternoon rains started. It was empty. Rendor families no longer traveled past Braide Wood on their way to the other clans. The emptiness was an eerie reminder that none of us were sure what had happened to all

those families. Cameron said they were happily sharing their land with the Kahlareans. Even I wasn't gullible enough to believe that.

I sank onto a lonely bench. Perhaps I'd find Susan rallying councilmembers as she did before the battle of Morsal Plains. Maybe she'd be able to convince the king to reinstate the guardians. If anyone could, it would be her. But our people were angry and confused. What if they blamed her for leaving? I rested my hand on my sword hilt. My head ached. I was thinking too much again.

Linette would remind me that problems were often beyond our intellect to solve, and that we were meant to rely on the One's wisdom instead. I scratched my head. But would she tell me it was right to rescue a former Restorer from our current king? They were both appointed by the One, weren't they?

I whistled an off key tune as wheels hummed a steady rhythm, and trees and steep ridges gave way to gentler hills. Gradually a melody formed, and the words spun free from the clutter and confusion in my brain.

*Awesome in majesty, perfect in power.*

I leaned back against the bench. Of course. Cameron might be king, but even a king could make mistakes. The One was the only true king. This situation that was so confusing wasn't too complex for Him.

"Show me my next step," I whispered. "And protect the men while I'm away. Oh, and Jake. I have a hunch he's going to need You, too."

After Chapter 14

Lukyan:

Wade and Jake left my cottage in such a hurry they didn't slide the door closed. Bracing myself against my chair arms, I eased to my feet. Each of my bones grumbled a reminder of my age as they took my weight. I was too old for all this chaos and danger.

I limped to the doorway and looked out at the trees. "Holy One, is it time for me to come home yet?" I whispered. "I long to serve where you need me, but the times are growing so dark, and my strength is growing frail. I'm ready to join You now. Look into my heart. It's breaking with the knowledge that Your people are being deceived."

I slid the door, shutting out the view of Braide Wood, wishing I could shut out the vivid picture of the clans trapped in confusion and doubt. Why would the One have allowed Cameron to create false Verses? How could He expect the people to know whom to follow? Had my counsel to Jake helped? I rejoiced in the young man's passion to protect the true Records, but could such an untried youth stand against so many powerful enemies?

*You were an untried youth once, too.*

The gentle reminder tugged a smile from my lips. "You're right, Blessed One. Jake doesn't walk alone, and neither do I. Will you join me for my meal?"

I took a small bread loaf from the basket on my table. Tara had brought them over yesterday. Always thinking of others, even when supplies were scarce. Indulging in a small luxury, I set the loaf on a heat trivet. Tara's bread was already delicious, but warming it filled my home with a yeasty, nutty scent. Picking it up, I tore the loaf in half and lifted the pieces.

*"Creator of this fragile flesh,  
Sustainer of my life's brief length,  
Provider of all humble needs,  
I thank you for this gift of strength."*

The childhood prayer comforted me. Some songkeepers were sure that the longer we lived, the more we would understand the Verses, grow in character, and follow the One with faithfulness and purity.

I took a small bite and chewed slowly. A lovely theory. My love for the One did grow with years of knowing Him. But my failings became even more obvious to me, more frustrating, more ingrained. And the more glimpses I had of the One's work, the more I longed to see Him face to face, away from the shroud of this troubled world. My old teacher often told me that straining to see around the next bend in the road would cause me to stumble over the stones on my current path.

Carrying my bread and a mug of lukewarm clavo, I settled into my chair. Each songkeeper felt a unique calling to various aspects of the Verses. Many loved teaching, studying, reviewing, and analyzing the meaning of the genealogies and the parts of the Records that looked to the past. Others drew joy from the practical counsel and rules for serving the One and others in each present day. But I'd always been most intrigued with the Verses that looked to the future. The Deliverer who would come.

As a young songkeeper, I asked the One each day when that promise would be fulfilled. As a grown man, seeing ever growing threats against our clans, I asked again, often with earnest tears. In recent seasons as danger piled upon danger, I continued to ask. Each time, I heard a quiet voice answer, "Soon."

More of a habit than a new conversation, I asked again. "Creator of our land, Protector of our people, how much worse must we face before You come as our Deliverer? Isn't it time?"

*Before you draw your last breath, Child. You will see the Deliverer.*

The morsel of bread caught in my throat and I coughed so hard, I doubled over. Fumbling for my mug, I gulped some liquid, wiped the tears from my eyes. Had I heard correctly? I knew the only sensible response to the One's words was, "Let it be so."

But this answer was so unexpected, so specific. The skin rose on the back of my neck. My limbs trembled, as they sometimes had when the mist lowered on worshippers in the Lyric tower. "What? When? How can that be? Have you noticed how old I am? Do you mean I'll see a vision of Him? You can't mean . . ."

My objections finally stammered to a halt. Oh, the foolish babbling that overcomes us when we are in the presence of all holiness and wisdom and love. I eased from my chair to my knees and lifted my arms as far as my stiff shoulders would allow. Wonder and gratitude stole my voice. But my heart exploded in song, a song of two words, over and over in ever rising pitch. "Thank you."

After Chapter 20

Arland:

Broken ropes beside the tree trunk gave mute testimony to what had happened. The boy was gone and now a frustrating complication had just spun further out of control.

Ian cursed and rounded on me. “Jake escaped.”

Wade picked up a rope and stared at the blood soaked into the fiber. “You tied him? I’ve told you I can vouch for him.”

Could this situation get any worse? “I couldn’t afford the risk.”

Wade threw the rope to the ground and clenched his fists. Then seeming to remember he’d just pledged loyalty to me, he took a few steps back, still looking ready to explode.

Ian’s snorted. “You should have let me take care of this when he set off the signaler. I’ll go after him.” He stooped and studied the ground.

Would Jake run straight to Lyric? Would Cameron soon have a Restorer in his pocket to add to all the other power he wielded against the clans?

Even if that was Jake’s plan, I couldn’t let Ian track him and kill him. As angry as I was at the injustices the One has allowed in the clans, I didn’t want the blood of a Restorer on my hands.

Wade stared past me as if I’d become invisible. “I’ll find him.”

Ian straightened with a sneer. “Thanks, but I’ll handle this.”

We had enough enemies without fighting each other. I tightened my sword belt. “No.” Should we wait for Cameron’s men? If Jake informed them where we were, we could fight them here. Or should we retreat and gather more forces? Time to take control. “Ian, tell the men to break camp.”

“We’re all going after him? Won’t that take us too close to Lyric?” Ian brightened. “Or do you mean to attack Cameron in Lyric?”

“No. We’re going a different direction.”

“But Jake—”

“Isn’t our problem.”

Ian’s hand twitched against the knife in his belt. Would he obey orders? Wade stepped up and stood alongside me. The muscles in Ian’s face hardened as he glared at us both, but he turned and stomped away.

My shoulders relaxed. “Thanks, Wade.”

He still stared past me and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I pledged to follow you.” His tone made it clear just how unhappy that made him. Thanks to Jake two of my best men no longer trusted me.

“Wade, scout ahead. We’ll head away from Lyric.”

Another half-hearted shrug and he walked away.

The sound of men dismantling our camp blended with low grumbles. I walked to the nearby creek to fill my water gourd. Tristan had entrusted these men to me. Somehow I had to keep their morale up. For the past days, we'd been doing nothing but reacting, battered like a caradoc caught in a river's current. I knelt and splashed water in my face.

Maybe I should have let Ian chase down Jake. It would have provided a small victory. I could have forced Jake to tell the men he had Restorer signs and let him deal with their confusion.

But if even Jake wasn't clear on what the One wanted of him, how was I supposed to know the right thing to do?

At the battle of Morsal Plains I'd seen synchbeams from the sky terrify and confuse the Hazor army. I'd seen a seemingly unremarkable woman rally the guardians into a battle they couldn't win, yet somehow did.

And I'd felt the same incomprehensible presence on the trail with Jake, when the mist descended and time stopped.

"The One is with you," Jake had said afterwards. How could such simple words from a young pup knock me back like a blow?

I straightened and frowned up at the expressionless sky. "You have a funny way of showing it."

After Chapter 33

Jake:

Dear Mom and Dad,

It's weird how fast I've started to miss writing. A simple notebook and pen would be a luxury. This thin fabric is the best I could come up with. I've tried thin strips of wood, even tried shredding, pulping, and drying it out to form paper. I must be doing something wrong.

Remember that school project in fourth grade where we made quill pens? At least that's come in handy. There's a really thin reed that grows near the healer lodge in Braide wood, and it's hollow and sturdy enough to use. With a sharpened tip and one of the darker dyes that fabric weavers use, I can at least make an attempt at a letter to you.

I know it may never reach you. Don't know if I could somehow toss it through the portal. Or maybe one day I'll carry it with me when I come home.

Or am I meant to stay here for the rest of my life?

Just one of the many questions that zip around my head.

At least I don't have to worry about anyone reading my private thoughts—since no one here reads.

Right after you left, the worried rumbling started. Everyone welcomed the Rendor clan, but within a few days suspicions buzzed around Lyric. "They spent weeks in Rhus. What if they are being controlled by Rhusicans and will turn on us one day?" The poor people were battered, exhausted, and then the other clans treated them like lepers. My first priority was to secure Rendor and clear it of all the battle damage so they could reclaim their homes.

Cameron continues to be a problem. It should be obvious to everyone how he's worked against the interests of the clans. Yet somehow he manages to spin things. He still has powerful supporters. The Council is deciding where to banish him that won't ultimately cause more harm. He seems to have alliances with all our enemies. There are times I wish the Council believed in capital punishment.

A big, and hurtful surprise to me, is how much damage Cameron's fake records have caused. Lukyan was right. Once people learned they'd been fooled, they wondered if the true Records could be trusted, either. Even some songkeepers have broken off from their core beliefs. Some are spending time reanalyzing the Verses and creating new interpretations that Lukyan says are a twisted manipulating of the words, while others are pushing for teaching people that the Verses aren't as sacred as once thought—more on a level of fairy tales.

When tempers get hot in the Council, and bickering seems like the only hobby in Lyric, I'm extra grateful for Wade and the other guardians. Don't worry. They've got my back.

Why are happy endings so complicated? It's all a lot more than I know how to handle. I know if you were here, you'd tell me to pray, to lean into the One's strength and not my

own. You'll be happy to hear that each day at first light, I go to the tower and spend some time with Him.

I don't want you to worry. The challenges are big. But I keep thinking of all that the One has already done to bring me to this place. Whatever comes next, He'll provide again. That's who He is.

I hope I'll find a way to get this note to you. Don't worry about me. I'm where I'm meant to be. There's nothing quite as amazing as that sense that you fulfilling the purpose you were created for. Just pray I do it in a way that honors Him.