

The Restorer's Son

Sword of Lyric Series Book 2

By Sharon Hinck

Chapter One - Kieran

“Hills of Hazor take you,” I swore for at least the tenth time since first light. My sword hacked at thick underbrush, but when I shouldered my way forward, a twig snapped back at my face. I cursed the day I’d met the last Restorer. It was because of her that I was battling through this forsaken forest below Cauldron Falls. My blade deserved a more substantial enemy.

A squint-eyed badger rambled out from a thornbush. Sniffing the air, it bristled and ducked back under cover. Wise plan. I was hungry. Stinging beetles landed on me from the low-hanging branches overhead. I swatted them away and stalked onward.

Why hadn’t I convinced Tristan to leave her in Shamgar when she first turned up? A witness to his crime, and he had brought her to our refuge in the deserted city. Typical. He was a naïve idiot sometimes.

She hadn’t looked very threatening that day—rain-soaked, bloody, and unconscious. If only I’d known then how much trouble she was capable of causing. What was that old saying? Don’t judge a rizzid’s menace until you see its teeth.

I recognized the danger she posed when a deep scrape on her face healed. Instantly. Hairs on my neck pricked as if I’d touched a misaligned magchip. I’d heard the old stories, but never seen it happen. It had been years since our people had chased after a mythic Restorer, but I knew the signs.

Exactly the kind of problem we hadn't needed. A Council spy or some other enemy would have been bad enough, but as I had watched her wounds vanish, I knew things were going to get very complicated.

And they did. I circled the trunk of a large spice tree and stopped. My hearing had grown unnaturally keen in the past days—keen enough, I hoped, to warn me if any Kahlareans lingered nearby. Cauldron Falls roared in the distance, and a few animals rustled in the damp leaves of the forest floor. Guardians from our clans patrolled the river below the falls. I should be able to hear or see some sign of them.

I frowned. Nothing.

I pulled another beetle off my arm and ground it under my heel, then pushed through a clump of bracken and caught a glimpse of the river. Water crashed from the hundred-foot falls and swirled in an angry mass at the base. The rocks had worn into a rounded bowl, earning the name Cauldron Falls. I hiked along the river's edge, picking my way over the boulders and scanning the opposite bank. The river surged, wide and rough, a natural barrier to protect our lands. Unhappily, upstream from the falls the river narrowed, and a gap cut between steep rock cliffs. The pass provided a natural pathway into our lands.

The trail to the top of the falls rose steeply. I sheathed my sword and grabbed the rocks to pull myself up. A few stones dislodged beneath my boots and crashed down behind me. I climbed faster. This was a bad spot to be caught by an enemy.

The river border used to be easy to guard, but lately our patrols were in danger from syncbeams—long-range weapons the Kahlareans used from cover on their side of the river. Tristan was worried about an invasion, so I agreed to check things out. He probably figured

my trip would follow some historic precedent because a past Restorer gave his life fighting off two hundred Kahlareans at Cauldron Falls. Tristan liked traditions.

When I reached the top of the falls, I settled on a boulder, pulled out my gourd of orberry juice, and savored the loneliness. At my feet the water rushed by, violent and unpredictable, and I knew an instant kinship with the river.

The past few days had honed my irritation to a fine edge. After Susan and Markkel disappeared, Tristan begged me to present myself to the Council as the Restorer. I refused. He nagged. I snarled. Then he fought dirty. He sent my sister, Kendra, to talk to me. They'd been wearing me down. When I overheard Tristan talking about his concerns for the River Borders, I jumped at the excuse to leave. I couldn't stand any more of their earnest trust in me. The hope in their faces. The expectations I could never fulfill. Spare me from Braide Wood's overgrown reverence for the old myths. I wasn't the Restorer they looked for. It was a cosmic joke—a worse joke than the last Restorer had been. Susan of Ridgeview Drive, she called herself. No clan I'd ever heard of.

I pushed myself back to my feet and headed upstream. With luck I'd reach the outpost before the afternoon rains. The sky pressed low in the flat gray tones of midday. The air was warmer than in Braide Wood, and my tunic soon clung to the sweat on my skin. I knelt by the river's edge to splash cold water on my face, rub dirt from the stubble on my jaw, and rake some sticks and leaves from my hair. My black hair had always marked my status as an outsider. Even as a child I'd refused to hide my Hazorite blood. Instead I made the folk of Braide Wood even more uncomfortable by cropping my hair short, like the enemy Hazorites. It would have been impossible to hide anyway. Both Kendra and I took after our mother and had the thin frames and angled cheekbones of her heritage.

I straightened up and inhaled deeply, taking in the smell of pine and the tangy bite of the golden spice trees. The nonstop roar of rushing water muted my chafing thoughts, and some of the knots in my back loosened. I rubbed the back of my neck. The cave where I slept last night had an uneven rock floor. I could have stayed in Rendor's central city but decided I'd rather take my chances with the scavengers and bears than make conversation.

I adjusted my pack, shifting the weight to a more comfortable spot on my shoulders, and scanned the opposite shoreline for any sign of movement. With a little concentration, I could see small details from miles away, one of the few advantages of being the Restorer. A red-furred rizzid sunned on the rocks of the far bank, but I didn't spot any human enemies. I made a point to study the tree line closely. Kahlarean assassins were notorious for being nearly invisible in their hooded masks and mottled gray clothes. They would be a far greater danger than an average Kahlarean soldier, even one armed with a syncbeam.

I'd fought their assassins twice now and hadn't come off well either time. I suppose simply surviving an encounter with them should be considered a success—though I'm not sure my last experience counted as surviving. They were swift and silent, and even a scratch from their venblades caused fatal paralysis. And—my stomach knotted like a three-peg weaving at the thought—the Kahlareans were obsessed with killing the Restorer.

With a deep breath and another scan of the area, I continued upriver at a quicker pace.

The foul smell in the air was my first warning that something very bad had happened. I edged my way toward the outpost, waiting to be challenged by one of the handful of guardians assigned this patrol. Although some were young, the guardians tended to be well trained and should have been watching their perimeter. A droning sound buzzed through the air as I drew closer. Using a large tree for cover, I peered into the clearing near the pass.

Three men sprawled on the ground in front of the outpost's hut. The low hum was caused by swarms of insects feasting on their dead bodies.

I ran forward and crouched by one of the still forms. No need to look for signs of life. They'd been dead several days. All three showed the charred marks of syncbeam blasts. One boy hadn't even had a chance to draw his sword.

Kahlareans. How many had slipped through the pass after killing the guardians? Was this the first wave of a full-fledged invasion, or were they clearing the way for another small group of assassins to make their way toward Lyric, hunting the Restorer?

Crunching footsteps startled me. I stood and swiveled my head, but too late. Three Kahlarean soldiers entered the clearing. I took a few slow steps back, thinking fast.

"You're late," one of the men growled. Like most Kahlareans, his huge black eyes and sunken chin reminded me of a cave insect. His skin was the unnatural white of a corpse. These soldiers weren't hooded or masked, and they'd stopped long enough to talk, so they weren't assassins. So far, so good.

I shrugged. "Look's like there's been some trouble."

The soldier laughed. "No trouble at all, thanks to your syncbeams. So where is the next delivery?"

I rubbed my jaw. The Kahlareans had gotten their syncbeams from Hazor—from Hazorites with short black hair and angled features. I could work with that.

"Well, there's been a problem." I stalled, scrambling for inspiration. I could pretend to be from Hazor, but I couldn't produce a non-existent delivery of syncbeams.

The soldier drew his sword and stepped closer. My hand tightened over my hilt, but I didn't draw.

“We don’t have time for games.” He kicked one of the bodies. “They could be sending reinforcements anytime.”

Show no fear. Show no repulsion. I decided to try for irritation. “Don’t you get any news out here? Our armies took a beating at Morsal Plains. Hundreds of our own syncbeams were destroyed. We don’t have any to spare right now.”

The soldier tilted his head and rolled his bulbous eyes in my direction. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Just making a friendly visit to let you know we’re working on it. I can set up a new delivery time and take word back to Sidian in Hazor.”

The Kahlarean shook his head. “Too risky. We’re across now. Who knows how many more guardians will be sent here in a few days’ time?”

I shrugged. Not my problem.

The Kahlarean stepped closer and grabbed the front of my tunic, his sword close enough to my belt to force me to suck in my stomach. It had just become my problem.

I lifted my hands away from my sword. “Relax. We can work something out.”

“I’ll tell you what we’ll work out,” said the soldier. “You’ll escort a group of us back to Corros Hills right now to collect the delivery.”

I laughed but regretted it when he twisted the fistful of tunic under my neck, all but cutting off my air.

“You can’t travel through the clans,” I said. “You’d be spotted the first time we tried to use a transport. And if we cut cross-country, it would take half a season.”

“Not us,” he said. “Them.” He let go of me, and I stumbled back. Three figures had melted into the clearing. They wore gray hoods, and their faces were covered with cloth masks. Assassins.

Caradung, I cursed silently.

“Them?” I said. “Why would they want to go on a trade mission?” Even a weapons trader from Hazor would know that Kahlarean assassins were an elite group. They were the villains in the tales told around glowing heat trivets on cold nights—with good reason.

The soldier grinned. “They have a few things to take care of on the way, but that doesn’t concern you. They’ll have no trouble blending in. You”—he jabbed a fat finger into my chest—“get them to Corros.”

This would be a great time for some special Restorer vision to give me a plan. I wasted a few seconds waiting. Nothing. I shifted my gaze from the assassins back to the soldier.

I could draw my sword. I might have a chance against the three soldiers, but how many heartbeats would it take for an assassin’s dagger to fly through the air and lodge in my chest? I’d recover, but that would be even worse. They’d know exactly what I was. I shrugged and willed my coiled muscles to relax.

“All right. If they can keep up. I don’t have time to waste in the clan territories.”

The tallest of the three assassins walked toward me on feet that didn’t make a sound. His large eyes looked into mine.

I hoped that with all their other talents they couldn’t read minds.

Finally, he nodded once.

I started breathing again while sweat ran down my back. “When do you want to leave?”

The two other assassins looked at each other. The tall one in front of me gestured with his arm toward the edge of the clearing. I caught a glimpse of metal strapped to his wrist when his sleeve moved. A venblade. One of a host of silent and hidden weapons I knew he carried.

I needed to get word to Tristan about the outpost attack. I needed to get as far from these assassins as I could. I needed a drink—something stronger than orberrry juice.

Instead I turned and led the way into the woods, my skin crawling at the thought of the three silent figures following me.