

The Restorer's Son – Sword of Lyric Series Book 2

by Sharon Hinck

BONUS SCENES

After Chapter 3

Tagatha:

I shoved our door open with one arm, holding baby Luc against my hip with the other.

My husband looked up from a wooden puzzle he was doing with our daughter. “Wow, that was quick. You usually spend half the day at the wool store.”

I set Luc on the floor and pushed my hair out of my face. “Didn’t even get there. Guess who I ran into?”

Jameth stood, rubbing a sore spot on his lower back. “Do I get a clue? Your parents can’t be pried out of Braide Wood when it isn’t a Feast day. Other family?”

“Mm. Sort of.”

“Not Tristan, then? All right, I give up. Who did you run into?”

“Kieran. And he was bleeding. Looked like he’d lost a sword fight or something. I told him he should come here so we could help him out, but he was in a hurry.”

Jameth turned away to hide a wince—and not the kind of wince that came from the backache he’d picked up unloading a recent shipment of stone from Terramin.

I stepped around the puzzle pieces. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“That face you made.”

“You don’t like my face?” Grinning, he wandered into our kitchen alcove and scooped the last of the morning’s *clavo* into a mug.

With one eye on our children, I followed him. “You know I like your face just fine. And all the rest of you.”

His broad shoulders squared and he winked at me over the mug as he raised it. After all this time, he still made my breath catch. In spite of my mother’s horror at our move to Lyric, we’d created a beautiful life here. Still, I’d felt the weight of her disappointment last time she’d visited. She believed I’d abandoned Braide Wood, with all the history and traditions that wove our family together.

I sank onto the bench by our table and ran my hand over the golden wood. Of course I missed Braide Wood—the smooth, twining branches, the scent of pine, and the laughter and stories around a crowded dinner table. I shook my head. I still loved our clan, but I also loved

the excitement of Lyric. Most of all, I loved Jameth. And he needed to be in Lyric for his trading business.

“Glad you like all the rest of me.” Jameth patted his ample stomach. “You feed me so well, there’s more of me to like every day.” He took a drink and his face puckered at the bitterness of stale, over-steeped clavo.

“That’s the face. That’s the one you made when I told you I’d seen Kieran.”

He choked out a laugh. “You could be right.”

I should never have told him about my childhood crush. I’d tagged along with Tristan and Kieran for years, so it was only natural my romantic dreams latched on to him briefly . . . as they had with several of the boys in Braide Wood. Silly, looking back on it, but perfectly natural. I snickered. What a disaster that pairing would have been.

I rose from the table, took Jameth’s mug, dumped it out, and started a fresh batch of clavo. “I just wanted to help. He looked like he was in trouble.”

Jameth snorted. “What else is new?”

We walked back to the main room where children were playing. “I know, but Tristan would want us to look out for him.” I shrugged. “Nothing I can do now. I better get to the shop.”

Jameth gathered up baby Luc and handed him to me, then hoisted our daughter onto his shoulders. “Make it quick. I can’t bring Tamara to my meeting with the Sandor traders today.” Our daughter tilted her curly head and grinned from the high perch.

Luc squirmed and bleated with that half-giggle-but-I’ll-start-crying-in-a-moment sound that he had perfected. I bounced him a few times. “I’ll hurry. Thanks for watching Tamara. I can’t choose yarn colors with both of them tearing the store apart.” The shop spun caradoc wool into the softest textures and dyed so many beautiful shades. Luc was outgrowing his sweater, and I wanted to three-peg a new one in the exact shade of green that glowed from the trees in Braide wood at first light.

Jameth grinned. “I know. But last time I thought you’d gotten lost in there.” He bent to plant a quick kiss on my lips. Tamara giggled and tilted forward, planting sticky fingers in my hair.

I untangled her and gave my husband a playful shove. “I didn’t hear you complain when I finished your new tunic.” Luc squawked again. “Sure you don’t want to watch them both? I would finish faster.”

“Ha! Luc’s my secret weapon. He won’t let you dally.”

I tossed my hair back and marched down the street to my favorite store. I found myself looking about for Kieran. Maybe I’d ask Tristan about him next time Tristan and Kendra came to Lyric for a gathering. Right now I had more important things to think about. If I got some extra green wool, I could add a trim to the tunic I’d started for Jameth. The color would bring out the flecks in his hazel eyes. Breathing a prayer of thanks to the One for bringing Jameth and I together, I giggled as I slid open the door to the yarn shop.

After Chapter 5

Jake:

Good grief. What was the big deal? It wasn't like the attic held state secrets, or that I'd mess up some fancy rug clumping around in my dirty tennis shoes. Mom and Dad weren't even around, so it wouldn't hurt anyone if I popped upstairs to see the new room. I might even find my baseball-card shoebox that had disappeared after one of Mom's cleaning binges.

Throwing a quick glance over my shoulder, I scrambled up the ladder. I got the whole deal about how she needed some privacy once in awhile. Jon and Anne were into everything. I had to barricade my door to keep them out of my stuff. I'd only take a quick look around and she'd never know.

The reality was more boring than I'd expected. A few bins and boxes and a dusty old chair. The notebook looked new, though. Probably a journal. Mom had talked about starting one.

I stepped closer. Had she written about me? I'd overheard her once on the phone complaining to a friend about how hard it was to be a parent. The words had startled me. Sure, my three younger siblings were a handful, but did she really see *me* as a burden? Those years of doctors and hospitals . . . I'd never really thought about how it felt from her side. I was busy dealing with the experience from my end. And now that I was getting ready for college, what was she thinking of me? Did she believe I was ready? Did she think I'd be a success?

I picked up the book. Just one quick peek and I'd put it right back. If she had written something about me, I had a right to know, right?

Instead of juicy info, I found some boring notes about her Bible study. I turned a page and grinned. She'd drawn a pencil sketch. Cool. I didn't know she could draw. On a whim, I scrawled a little note inside. Sure, it gave away my trespassing, but she'd laugh when she saw it. She had a good sense of humor . . . most days.

I dropped the journal and ducked to search deeper under the eaves. My missing shoebox could be tucked back in the shadows.

A prickle danced across my skin, an uncomfortable sensation like an electric razor. The hum built and vibrated inside my skull. Maybe Dad had made a mistake wiring the lights. I glanced down to be sure I wasn't standing on any metal ductwork. Something electrical was buzzing, but I couldn't figure out why it resonated so powerfully in my body. I shook my head a few times and stumbled forward, wincing against the rising ache behind my eyeballs. I grabbed my head as if to keep it from exploding and squeezed my eyes shut. Lightning sparkled across the insides of my eyelids. Was I having a stroke or something?

A sudden whoosh of air engulfed me, along with a small pop of pressure releasing, as if I'd pushed my way through a particularly stubborn revolving door. I pulled my hands away

from my face but saw only darkness. Flailing my arms in all directions, I couldn't find the rafters or boxes or my way back to the ladder. Did strokes cause blindness? I stumbled a few steps and finally found a hard surface. Something solid and round, like a twisting beam, spiraled upward beyond what I could touch. Impossible. The attic roof wasn't that high. My legs went rubbery, and I stumbled a few steps. *Come on, Jake, keep breathing.*

Panic built with each gasp. I tried for a slow deep breath, and inhaled an unfamiliar spicy scent, a combination of pine and cinnamon and fresh-cut grass. "Help?" My voice carried in thin, open air. I couldn't ignore the evidence any longer. I wasn't in the attic.

I moaned and clung to the beam that felt like a tree trunk. I couldn't be too far from home. Maybe the nature reserve near our house? Someone would find me eventually. With the decision to hold on and wait for help, the rushing pulse of my heartbeat steadied.

A snuffling noise to my left threw my heart into a gallop again. Wolf? Coyote? Bobcat? Whatever outdoor wilderness I'd found myself in, did it hold predators? I couldn't just stand here, blind, disoriented, waiting to be attacked. A gravelly growl to my right raised the hairs on my neck. I pushed off from the trunk and moved away from the sounds. The uneven ground underfoot further convinced me that I was outside somewhere. For hours I stumbled aimlessly, in total blackness, terrified that the world had disappeared and I was completely and forever alone. Each time I'd sink to the ground to rest, some strange sound would propel me forward again.

After what seemed like years, my straining eyes caught the contour of hills. Was my vision returning? A few minutes later, I stared at the sky and realized dawn was breaking. I wasn't blind. I'd just been stumbling around in the night—but a night like I'd never seen before. No moon or stars, no distant city lights.

With the relief of being able to see, a hint of wonder swelled under my ribs. A smooth, rolling, gray-green golf course stretched out from the clump of trees. In the distance, tall white towers rose above a strange curvy wall with a gray, featureless sky overhead. I choked back a laugh. It looked just like a scene from one of my video games. I glanced up nervously, expecting some animated dragon to swoop toward me.

Man, oh, man. Back when I had chemo, they'd warned me of some strange side effects, but could hallucinations show up all these years later? Where was I? And more importantly, what was I supposed to do next?

After swallowing hard, I coaxed my lungs to work again. I took a few more steps, cautiously testing a small circle of earth around me. Would lava creatures burst through the nearby rocks and attack? If I stepped in the wrong place, would quicksand swallow me into the ground?

I was thinking like a video game again. My gaze trailed to the city in the distance. If this were a video game, the logical next step would be to head toward the city, collecting coins and tokens to boost my score. Unfortunately, I didn't see either. But if I stood near the empty grove much longer, I'd probably grow roots and turn into one of the weird twisty-trunked trees. Gingerly testing each step, I finally decided the odd, mossy ground would

remain firm, so I broke into a jog toward the city. I only hoped this hallucination didn't mean the cancer was back, or that it had spread to my brain.

After Chapter 7

Jameth:

Kieran slipped out into the quiet early morning streets along with the strange boy he'd accumulated on his latest misadventure. I closed the door behind them and scrubbed at my beard with both hands, wishing I could scratch away the frustration burning beneath my skin. Bad enough that Tag's family still disapproved of our decision to live in Lyric. When I made a life pledge to her, I accepted her outspoken family was part of the bundle. I braced myself for strong opinions, loud disagreements, and the chaos at Tag's family gatherings. But this! Council guards searching homes, Lyric in an uproar, and Kieran endangering our family by coming to us for help. Why hadn't I thrown him out the moment I got home yesterday?

A soft hand touched mine and pulled it away from my face. Tagatha nestled up against me, each soft curve coaxing the tightness from my muscles. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I know you didn't want to get involved."

I sighed. "I don't have anything against him."

Tag handed me a steaming mug of clavo, then wrapped an arm around my waist, staying so close I could smell the grassy fresh-air scent of her hair. "Since when?"

A chuckle rumbled in my chest. "You're right. He's caused trouble as long as I've known your family. I'm tired of seeing Tristan and Kendra, or your parents, picking up the pieces. And now I've done the same thing. Do you know what they're saying he did?"

"Shh." She gently guided the mug toward my mouth.

I drank, letting the warmth coax the anger from me. Tagatha knew exactly how to change my course when my temper wanted to rise. She could probably charm a better price out of a Terramin stone dealer.

"We did the right thing," Tag said as she rubbed slow circles on my back. "Come on. I tried a new bread stew for breakfast. You'll love it." I let my muscles relax and allowed her continual optimism to distract me through breakfast.

Too bad I couldn't bring her to work to keep whispering reassurances. My apprentice at the warehouse greeted me with a breathless account of the latest rumors. Council guardians stopped by twice and questioned me. When I came home for lunch, someone lurked in the alley across from our house.

Give me a transport full of crates to stack, or stone to quarry, or a hard bargain to strike with a greedy trader. That was solid ground. Keeping secrets, feeling scrutiny, wondering how to protect my family in the midst of the confusing stories circulating in Lyric—that was sucking the life from me like a Shamgar mud pit.

The next morning, Tagatha and I rose early so we'd have some time before the children demanded our attention. Sitting at the old wood table, we held hands and whispered prayers to the One. Tagatha of the generous heart prayed for the safety of Kieran and Jake. I

couldn't bring myself to ask blessings on the man who had put our family in danger. Still, I was able to murmur an earnest plea for our protection.

Was it a test of my faith, or the One's strange sense of humor? As I finished my prayer, an ominous pounding shook our door. Tagatha gasped and turned pale.

"Stay here. I'll take care of it." I marched to the door and yanked it open, hoping to stop further noise so the children wouldn't wake up.

The two Council Guards standing in the doorway had hard-edged faces, cold eyes, and a completely different demeanor than the guardians I knew. One of them pushed past me into our front room.

My fists clenched and I sized them up. I should knock their scrawny heads together and toss them out the door. Tagatha squeaked a protest as one of them strode into her kitchen and rummaged in the cubbies.

"We have orders to search your home," said the guard who stayed near me at the door.

I forced my arms against my sides, fighting the temptation to take a swing at him. "Fine. But—"

A terrified cry came from the children's room. Tamara ran out toward me and clung to my legs, sobbing. My chest tightened and heat crept up my neck. "What were you expecting to find in my children's room?"

I gathered up my daughter and soothed her. Tagatha came out carrying Luc who stared at the guard with round eyes. Tag's eyes were almost as wide and scared. I bristled, every instinct primed to protect my family.

The Council Guard drew his sword. A sword drawn against me in my own home! Rage glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Before I could roar a command for them to get out, he spoke terse words that knocked the breath from my lungs.

"We also have orders to arrest you both for aiding an enemy of the clans. The Council is considering banishment. Come with us."

The wail that rose from Tag's throat will haunt me the rest of my days. I couldn't reassure her. Even if I fought the guards, where could we go? If we ran we'd be no better than banished anyway. "The children." I choked the words out. "Let us find a neighbor to care for them until a messenger gets word to our family."

The guard jerked a nod and led us outside, the children still in night tunics, clinging to us in panic.

Family obligation had been the cause of this disaster, but family was also my only comfort. If necessary, Tara and Payton would take in their grandchildren. Or Tristan and Kendra would raise them as their own. Tag met my eyes and raised her brows, waiting for guidance.

I forced confidence into my voice. "We'll speak with the Council and get this straightened out."

My beautiful Tagatha fought back tears so she wouldn't add to our children's confusion and fear. She'd always been the glow of first light, fresh, hopeful, as if there were no such thing as night. But the lines of her face had all changed, the way the walls of the city changed late in the day as dusk fell. It broke my heart to see the gray cold of night coloring her spirit. Even if the best outcome happened and we returned to our home and children and normal life, would she ever have the same clear innocent light again?

After Chapter 12

Payton:

The residue of poison tinged the dead crops a sickly yellow. The burning smoke was long gone, but the reek clung to my clothes and seeped into my skin as I worked my way along the rows of what had once been fertile farmland. Anger drove my hoe deep into the ground, and I turned over a strip of damaged plants from the edge of a section that had been spared. Protecting the remaining plants was our first priority. Susan and the guardians had saved perhaps a third of the crop. Even with careful rationing, the months ahead would be brutal.

Across the wide expanse of Morsal Plain, other Braide Wood farmers—men, women, and children—worked to remove the ruined grain. Shock and dismay had given way to determination, fueled by the improbable victory our guardians had won over Hazor. We were alive. We still held our clan. So while there was strength in our bodies, we could work the land and survive.

A few rows away, Skyler straightened and rubbed his back. Strange transtechs tools weighted down his belt, and he held up several plasteen tubes with various liquids. “I suspected an organic toxin. You know there’s good reason to believe the Kahlarean ven blades use the venom from a living creature. My guess is rizzid, but of course no one knows. Anyway, we can only guess at what the Hazorites might have extracted. The chemical profile isn’t making sense. If I could figure out what it was made from, I might find a way to neutralize the effects more quickly.” He rubbed his forehead, pushing dirt into the creases of his frown lines.

I hadn’t heard so many words from Skyler in the past six seasons combined, and I wasn’t sure if they were addressed to me. Should I answer? Offer encouragement or thanks for this rare participation in the problems of the clan? Or would that distract him and send him stomping off?

He poured some red liquid into one of the tubes and it turned yellow. He touched it with a small buzzing tool that looked like a narrow signaler and it turned green. “No, no, no.” He squatted down and scooped up another bit of earth, muttering to himself.

Best to leave him alone. He was clearly talking to himself. At Tara’s urging, I’d stopped by his solitary cabin each season over the years, only to suffer the sting of his bitter words. Years of solitude had only solidified his resentment for everyone else in the clan. Still, he was here now. That was something.

I used the hem of my tunic to blot sweat from my face and rubbed my callused hands together before resuming my grip on the hoe.

Hours later, Skyler was still collecting samples, mumbling to himself, and generally ignoring everyone else. We’d protected a small section of young grain from the poisoned

earth nearby. How long would it take for the damaged ground to be safe for new plantings? Would there be years of hunger ahead?

My eyes traveled to the forested hill leading to our clan homes. The soft collar of light above the tree line had deepened. "Time to head home," I called to the families working nearby. We gathered our tools and hiked toward the woods. The cool scent of resin soothed me, as did turning my back on the ugly, scarred fields. The One had saved our clan. He certainly wouldn't leave us to starve. If our crops were small for a while, we'd forage and hunt. My shoulders lightened and I picked up my pace. Tara would have a spicy soup waiting tonight. Warmth filled my belly . . . more from the thought of her than the soup.

She'd spiced my life in countless ways during our years together, and I kept discovering new sides to her. She was a nurturing mother and grandmother, yet she'd taken all the recent dangers in stride. She'd also torn a strip out of Kieran and Tristan when she learned they'd tricked Nolan into escaping back to Hazor. I grinned at the memory of her fury over that incident.

Now that all the guests had left, our home had been unusually quiet. Talia and Gareth were off visiting friends, and Tristan and Kendra were as preoccupied as newlyweds. My grin deepened. Perhaps Tara and I could take advantage of the extra quiet tonight.

After Chapter 15

Tristan:

I stormed down the path, even angrier than I'd been climbing up to the clearing a short time before. I'd devoted my life to protecting my family and my clan. Now my family was in more danger than ever. Tag had been a pest as a kid sister, but even though I never admitted it to her, her bright chatter had a way of lifting my heart. She trusted everyone, was game to take any dare, and forgave easily. The picture of her being banished--cast from the clans, separated from her children--twisted a hollow pain in my chest. All because of Kieran.

I'd done the right thing. Sending him away was the only option. He wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't take responsibility for the trouble he caused.

The ache under my ribs sank lower, a wrenching, bitter, empty throb. All I could do now was limit the harm. Kieran should appreciate that. It was one of his pragmatic theories he liked to spout: when you can't salvage a situation, at least forestall more damage. If he stayed in the clans with his status as an outcast, he put more innocent people—more of my family—in danger.

I batted at a low-hanging branch, hitting it so hard it snapped. *Holy One, he's supposed to help us. Why make him a Restorer when he doesn't acknowledge You and won't accept his role?*

Slowing my steps, I gathered my breath. Was I really as angry at the One as I was at Kieran? The thought frightened me. The songkeepers said we could speak honestly to the One, that He knew our hearts anyway. But even when Kendra was lost to Rhusican poison, I'd focused my anger on the enemy, never against the One.

My feet had automatically carried me toward home, but as I drew close, I spotted Kendra. Her slim figure had begun to show a subtle roundness. Even her face seemed softer with the hints of motherhood. Her long dark hair fell free behind her as she relaxed in a chair on the porch, her eyes closed. I wanted to run to her, bury my fingers in her rich hair, feel her breath against my face, taste her lips that could erase every painful thought from my mind.

Instead I backed into the woods and headed toward the lehken plateau. I couldn't face her. Once I told her that I'd send Kieran away, could she forgive me? Would things ever be the same between us again?

After Chapter 19

Nolan:

I tugged my mother's arm, half supporting her and half dragging her away from the king's judgment room.

"Wait," she said breathlessly. "We should help him."

"Who? What are you talking about?" We needed to get out of the palace before another whim changed Zarek's mind.

"Kieran. Maybe there is something we could do to—"

"Mother. Weren't you listening? The king ordered our deaths. It would be suicide to interrupt again." I pulled her along and she didn't have the physical strength to resist.

She looked back over her shoulder. "But he saved us. We have to try to help him."

Rage burned from the core of my being and filled my chest. "Saved us? He's the reason I was charged with treason. And Zarek nearly had you killed, too. Kieran deserves whatever he gets. Now let's go!"

She sagged and I wrapped an arm around her waist. I barely felt the weight of her arm across my shoulders as we raced along crooked hallways and out the main entrance. "Almost home," I whispered. After a few more streets and a turn down a littered alley, our broken doorway promised refuge. Her legs barely supported her long enough to get inside. I settled her on her pallet and brought water and a new drug patch. She gave me a weak smile and closed her eyes.

Watching her surrender to sleep stirred my greatest fear: one day I'd see her close her eyes for the last time. No one recovered from Rammelite fever. Her effort to get to the palace and confront the king had probably stolen even more of her limited time. I knew I should feel grateful. She'd saved my life. But for some reason I also felt angry that she'd risked herself.

I collapsed into our one chair and stretched my feet out, rubbing my wrists which still remembered the manacles. No, I wasn't angry at her.

My hand traveled across my forearm. Yesterday, raw broken skin seared with pain at the slightest touch. Now the skin was whole. Even bruises had disappeared. What evil arts did Kieran know that gave him that sort of power? I shivered and jumped out of the chair, pacing our small common room.

Most of the Braide Wood barbarians had been predictable—clumsy, brutal enemies acting just as I expected. But Kieran had touched a deeper terror in me. I'd been desperate to escape him and thrilled when I succeeded. I'd even indulged some pride as I raced back to Hazor, thinking of the stories I'd tell the other messengers. I'd survived being a prisoner of our enemies, escaped, and brought valuable information for our army . . . or so I'd thought.

Seeing him in chains in the Hazor cell did little to ease my fear of Kieran. He was a dangerous enemy full of trickery and deceit.

Why had he used his skill at manipulation to convince the king to free me? Did he really feel remorse? He'd told the king he regretted what he'd done to me. Not likely. He was plotting some other scheme.

My mother stirred. She fought hard to hide her pain, but in her sleep, quiet groans escaped. I wanted nothing more than to get us both out of the city and far from all the danger, but she couldn't travel. For now, I could only keep her comfortable.

I knelt beside her pallet, blotting away the sheen of feverish sweat from my mother's face. The hollows of her cheeks were deeper than when I'd left for Morsal Plains with the army. I stood and shook out my arms, the weight of chains still lingering. If I ventured out to the markets, perhaps I could beg, borrow, or steal a bit of dried caradoc and make a broth. I wanted to make her better. Every part of me screamed in frustration because I couldn't. But at least I could get some food into her. With one more worried glance at my mother, I slipped out the door.

After Chapter 25

Zarek:

My sword danced, perfectly balanced in my grip. The young soldier across from me responded with such a timid thrust that I barely kept from decapitating him. “Attack me! Stop sniveling.”

He swung with more vigor, but still kept too much distance to be a threat. How could I ever strengthen my skills when every sparring partner feared accidentally nicking the king?

My mood darkened, and I advanced on the boy. One of my generals told me this lieutenant was the best swordsman he’d seen in years, but so far he’d acted like a skittish lehen colt. Before I could mount an attack that would force a stronger response, a messenger skidded to a stop in the doorway of the practice hall.

“Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt, but you asked for a report . . . ” The skinny boy wrung his hands and shifted from foot to foot. More sniveling.

I sheathed my sword and waved him into the room. “It’s all right. We hadn’t begun yet.”

The lieutenant, already covered in a sheen of sweat, turned a shade paler and wiped his forehead. The messenger took a few cautious steps into the room.

“The prison guard reports that Kieran interviewed the woman and she collapsed. The practitioner was summoned, and she recovered.”

My brows rose. I’d sent Kieran to question the newest trespassers from Braide Wood, not kill them.

I sighed and sank onto a nearby bench. “You’re dismissed,” I told the young lieutenant. He gave a stiff bow and half ran from the room. I turned to the messenger. “Tell the prison chief I need a more detailed report. Keep me informed. Oh, and tell my aide I want some orberrry wine.”

The messenger scampered off, and after murmured words outside the door, I enjoyed a few moments of blissful isolation to think. Had I been wrong to trust Kieran with this small job? Did he plan to silence the prisoners because they had information he wanted to keep from me?

Trust was never a wise plan. My grandfather had been murdered by his most trusted general, who was then killed by my father when he took the throne. I’d fended off several failed coups since becoming king. Kept me alert.

Maybe I was slipping.

Though I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, protecting my position every moment of every day created a deep loneliness that even a few convenient temple girls couldn’t chase away. My recent conversations with Kieran were a welcome distraction, and the strange Verses he recited stirred interest in me that I hadn’t felt in years. He’d had a chance to kill me and hadn’t taken it. Still, I knew better than to trust him.

Kieran had been a welcome diversion and a good Perish opponent, but the things he spoke of had added new complications to my life. Time to get my focus back on protecting my throne. Perhaps I would need to interview the new prisoners myself—as if I didn't have enough to do with Bezreth pressuring me to reopen the temples, the generals scheming, and enemies threatening every border.

I drew my sword and indulged in a few patterns, then reluctantly sheathed it. I really needed a good session of sparring. A smile stretched my lips. Perhaps Kieran would be an interesting opponent and far less overcautious than any of my soldiers. My mood lightened as I left the hall and headed toward my quarters.

After Chapter 28

Linette:

The mist brushed my skin, soaked into my pores, breathed comfort and courage into my heart. I'd felt this tangible sign of the One's presence before, but only during Feast Day gatherings, as I joined my voice with songkeepers and musicians and thousands of people filling the floor of the tower.

Today, one lone man knelt beneath the towering emptiness and carried on a silent conversation with the Maker of the world. As a timid onlooker, I was shocked that the One's holy love touched me as well. The One was doing something I hadn't known Him to do before. Instead of puzzling over the why, I savored Him. Every song I'd ever sung swirled in my mind in rich harmony, lifting my heart higher and higher. Tears poured down my face and I welcomed His touch.

When the mist lifted, Kieran still didn't move. Had the encounter overwhelmed him? Was he all right? I eased closer and looked up at the windows far above us. The sky was a deep gray.

"Kieran, it's getting dark." I touched his back, loathe to disturb his communion with the One.

He looked up, wonder and purpose lighting his face. "Did you see Him, too?"

I nodded. I would have loved to talk about the experience together, but night was too close and I needed to return to the songkeeper lodge. Once I was sure he was all right, I turned to leave.

"Wait. One thing. If I can get the Council to approve it, do you think any of the songkeepers would be willing to go to Hazor to teach the Verses to the people there?"

I frowned. This was the purpose the One had shared with Kieran? Of all the hopes I had for the One to protect our clans, sending our Restorer to our enemy would never have entered my mind.

"It's not my idea," he said, easing to his feet.

What could I say? The Council would never allow it. And what did his question truly mean? Was he asking my general opinion? Whether I knew of some bold songkeeper who would join him on that mission? Or did he specifically wonder if I would volunteer?

I glanced up at the tower's highest white stones, feeling smaller than usual. *Holy One, is that why You allowed me this touch of Your strength? Is this something You might want of me?*

"Yes, if it's something the One is asking for and if the Council approves it, I'm sure at least one songkeeper would travel to Hazor." I slipped away before I could take back the words. Would Kieran think I was willing to leave the clans? Did I want him to understand my answer that way?

The streets were almost deserted so close to nightfall. Yet when I reached the songkeeper lodge, I hesitated outside the door. I couldn't bring myself to go inside yet and enter the conversation around a warm meal, the chatter, the good-natured arguments about tempos for a song we had rehearsed that day. I needed time alone to absorb what I'd seen.

Since Dylan's death, I'd spent as much time as possible in the Lyric tower. After Lukyan was injured, I was needed more in Braide Wood, yet whenever I could, I returned to the tower. If I could have rolled out a pallet in the corner of the tower, I would never have left.

As Kieran talked to the One today, I'd felt the One as close as a father holding his toddler's hands and guiding each wobbly step.

The light that glowed in Kieran's face made me marvel—perhaps even stirred jealously. I'd served the One all my life and yearned for the new fresh passion Kieran showed. He had the courage to answer, "Yes," no matter what the One asked of him.

When Dylan died, I thought the pain, the questions, the wrenching emptiness would destroy me. Still, I clung to my will to obey, to serve, to go through the motions no matter how much of my joy was stripped away. I didn't reject the One. I continued to seek Him. But so much of my service felt lifeless and devoid of hope.

I rested my forehead against the lodge door. Maybe that was precisely why the One had allowed me to witness His interaction with Kieran today. To restore my initial passion. To rebuilt my faith. To coax me to live a life of, "Yes."

After Chapter 33

Susan:

The backdoor creaked as I slipped outside, and I hoped it wouldn't disturb Mark or Jake. We'd cleaned up the kitchen, had our pizza, and settled down for the night. But despite my exhaustion, I'd lain awake listening to Mark's soft snores for hours. Finally my restlessness drove me to our backyard.

Overhead the moon slipped in and out of clouds, and I settled on the porch steps to study the sky. The constant gray haze over the clans had felt like a brewing storm that never dissipated. And the total black emptiness of their nights was frightening. I was relieved beyond words to be back in my world of moonlight shadows against the trees and a midnight sky rich with stars.

I sighed. Even though I could glimpse eternity and see God's presence in the stars, His purposes still felt as cloudy as the hazy atmosphere over the clans.

Jake's hand had healed. Instantly. Completely. What did that mean? Was he the next Restorer?

I sat up and hugged my knees, my breathing turning ragged.

Not my son. Anything but that, Lord. I'll do extra shifts at the soup kitchen. Be nicer to the annoying chairman of the PTA. Memorize the whole New Testament. There are a million ways I can show my love for you.

But don't ask me to watch my son face danger. I've done that before, remember?

Over the swish of a distant car and summer crickets in the tall grass, the sounds of the pediatric cancer wing echoed in my mind: chirping monitors, murmuring voices, the silent tears of parents that held more volume than a scream. Jake had recovered, but I'd never forget the terror of those months and the fear that squeezed the breath from my lungs.

The same breathless dread hit me in Lyric when Jake had been under Rhusican thrall, a cold and contemptuous stranger. Each time he stared past me, each time a sneer colored his clipped words, each time he turned away, my heart contracted more tightly until I feared it would be crushed into dust.

But we'd made it home. The Jake we knew and loved had returned. I wanted to savor answered prayer, rescue, and normalcy. I wanted barbecues and picnics, family hikes at the nature center.

What if Jake went back to Lyric? What if he left forever? I pressed my forehead against my knees, the ache curling my spine until I thought I'd implode. I didn't want to confront what the future might hold for Jake.

Because it wasn't just Jake. Each of my children would one day set out to fulfill their own purposes—find their own way to serve God. I'd known that before they were born. Yet I hadn't let that knowledge intrude. Not while I held their soft powder-scented infant bodies.

Not while I pushed them on the swings and elicited joyous shrieks. Not while I held my breath in the back row wondering if they'd remember their lines in the school play.

When they lifted chocolate smeared faces for sticky kisses, when they lisped Sunday school songs, when they entrusted me with wounds from friends, or whispered their fears, or disappointments . . . somehow I convinced myself that I would always be their best ally, that even as adults they'd turn to me. My vision of the future was fuzzy, but for some inexplicable reason, when I pictured that vague era of grown children, I liked to assume they'd all find homes just down the block.

"Honey?" Mark called softly through the screen door.

"Out here."

He came outside and settled beside me. "What are you doing?"

I didn't realize the night air held a cold edge until his presence warmed me. "Mark, what if Jake has to go back through the portal? What if we're separated from him forever? And even if that never happens, what if the kids all grow up and grow away and we never see them? What if—"

"Whoa. Your imagination is off and running, isn't it?" He wrapped an arm around me.

My body softened against him slightly, but then I pulled up. "How can you be so calm? We have to figure out what it means."

"Why? It won't change what we need to do for our family."

He already had a plan? "All right. Lay it on me. What should we do?"

He turned and held my shoulders, thumbs rubbing gentle circles against my tight muscles. "The same as always. We love them. Protect them the best we can. Pray for them."

"But . . ." It wasn't enough. Surely he could see that. I needed answers, strategies, promises of how the story of each child would turn out. Then again, I had longed for those sorts of assurances as we floundered our way through Lyric and Braide Wood and Hazor and back again. In the midst of uncertainties, the One had guided our steps, provided unexpected allies, strengthened us when our hearts ached with fear. I sagged and let my head drop forward to rest against Mark's chest. Love, protect, pray. He was right.

"And trust," I whispered. "Trust that God's love is big enough for the next part of the story."

"That's my girl." His words were a deep approving rumble, and beyond them I heard an echo of an even deeper and stronger voice. Mark helped me to my feet.

I opened the door. "Let's get to bed. We need our rest. We have a lot of loving and praying to do tomorrow."