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*The*  
RESTORER'S  
JOURNEY



SHARON HINCK

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*to the One who is with us in even the dark places*

*“In every time of great need, a Restorer is sent to fight for the people and help the guardians. The Restorer is empowered with gifts to defeat our enemies and turn the people’s hearts back to the Verses.”*



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# Chapter One

JAKE

My mom was freaking out.

She stared out the dining room window as if major-league monsters were hiding in the darkness beyond the glass. Give me a break. Our neighborhood was as boring as they come. Ridgeview Drive's square lawns and generic houses held nothing more menacing than basketball hoops and tire swings. Still, Mom's back was tight, and in the shadowed reflection on the pane, I could see her biting her lip. I didn't know what to say to make her feel better.

I ducked back into the kitchen and used a wet rag to wipe off the counters. Clumps of flour turned to paste and smeared in gunky white arcs across the surface. I shook the rag over the garbage can, the mess raining down on the other debris we'd swept up. Broken jars of pasta and rice filled the bag. Our dented toaster lay on top of the mess, looking like it had been drop-kicked across the room. I stomped it down, twist-tied the bag, and jogged it out to the trash can by the garage. Usually I hated the chore of taking out the trash. Not tonight. Maybe if I erased the signs of our intruders, Mom would relax a little.

So Cameron and Medea dropped a few things when they were looking for supplies. No biggie. Why did my folks have such a problem with those two anyway? They'd been great to me. I trudged back into the house, rubbing my forehead. Wait . . . that wasn't right. A shiver snaked through my spine. Never mind. They were probably long gone by now.

"Kitchen's done." I carried the broom into the dining room, hoping Mom had finished in there. But she was still hugging her arms and staring out the window.

She turned and looked at the china cabinet, then squeezed her eyes shut as if they were hurting. "Why?" she whispered.

One cabinet door had glass shards jutting from it, and the other hung crooked with wood splinters poking out. Broken china covered the floor. Mom and Dad had been collecting those goofy teacups ever since they got married.

I pushed the broom against the edge of the fragments, but the chinking sound made her wince, so I stopped. Dad strode past with an empty garbage bag from the hall closet and stopped to give Mom a squeeze. He nodded toward me. "Honey, Jake's alive. Nothing else matters. We all got back safe." He leaned his head against hers, and I edged toward the kitchen in case they started kissing. For an old married couple, they were a little too free with their public displays of affection.

But my mom didn't look like she was in a kissing mood — not with her lips pressed together like that. I had a sneaking suspicion she was more freaked out about what had happened to my hand than to our house. Like when I had cancer as a kid. She'd gotten really stressed about the details of a church fundraiser and cranky about everything that went wrong — stuff that wasn't even important. It gave her a place to be angry when she was trying to be brave about a bigger problem.

“It’s only a piece of furniture.” Dad was doing his soothing voice. When would he catch on that it only made things worse?

“Only a piece of furniture we bought as a wedding gift to each other.” She swiped at some wet spots on her face. “Only twenty years’ worth of poking around garage sales and thrift stores together. Don’t tell me what it’s only, okay?”

“Okay.” Dad backed away from her prickles.

I made another ineffectual push with the broom. My folks didn’t argue much, but when they did, it grated like a clutch struggling to find third gear. Typical over-responsible firstborn, I wanted to fix it but didn’t know how.

Mom picked up a Delft saucer — what was left of it — and laid the pieces gently into the garbage bag. Dad folded his arms and leaned against the high back of one of the chairs. “I can repair the cabinet. That splintered door will need to be replaced, but the other one just needs new hinges. I can put in new glass.” His eyes always lit up when he talked about a woodworking project. The man loved his tools.

Mom smiled at him. Her tension faded, and she got all moony-eyed, so I ducked into the kitchen just as the doorbell rang. Thank heaven. “Pizza’s here!” I yelled.

Dad paid the delivery guy, and I carried the cartons into the living room. Flopping onto one end of the couch, I pried open a lid. “Hey, who ordered green peppers? Mom, you’ve gotta quit ruining good pizza with veggies.”

That made her laugh. “We’d better save a few pieces for the other kids.” She cleared the Legos off the coffee table and handed me a napkin.

I gladly surrendered the top pizza box, along with the gross green peppers, and dove into the pepperoni below. “Where is everyone?”

“Karen’s spending the night at Amanda’s—trying out her new driver’s license. Jon and Anne are at Grandma’s. But if they see the pizza boxes when they get home tomorrow . . .”

I nodded. “Yep. Pure outrage. I can hear it now: ‘It’s not fair. Jake always gets to have extra fun.’” I did a pretty good impression of the rug rats. What would the kids think if they found out what else they had missed? This had been the strangest Saturday the Mitchell family had ever seen.

I popped open a can of Dr Pepper. My third. Hey, I’d earned some extra caffeine. “So what do we tell the kids?”

Mom smiled and looked me up and down, probably thinking I was one of the kids. When would it sink in that I was an adult now? I guzzled a third of my pop and set it down with a thump. “We could tell them there was a burglar, but then they’d want to help the police solve the case, and they’d never stop asking questions.”

“Good point.” Mom licked sauce from her finger. “Jon and Anne would break out the detective kit you gave them for Christmas.”

Dad tore a piece of crust from his slice of pepperoni. “If we finish cleaning everything, 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.”

Dad wanted us to lie? So not like him. Then again, when Kieran told me Dad wasn’t originally from our world, I realized there were a lot of things he’d not been honest about. Now I was part of the family secret too.

He rested his piece of pizza on the cardboard box and looked at Mom. “Do we need to warn them?”

“Warn them?” She mumbled around a mouthful of melted cheese.

“In case Cameron and Medea come back.” His voice was calm, but I suddenly had a hard time swallowing. Something cold twisted in me when he said their names. The same cold that had numbed my bones when I’d woken up in the attic. Why? They’d taken care of me. No . . . they’d threatened me. Confusing images warred inside my brain.

“You think they’ll come back?” My baritone went up in pitch, and I quickly took another sip of pop.

Dad didn’t answer for a moment. “It depends on why they came. If they plan to stay in our world, we need to find them—stop them. But my guess is that Cameron wants to return to Lyric with something from our world that he can use there. That means they’ll be back to go through the portal.”

Mom sank deeper into the couch and looked out the living room windows. At the curb, our family van shimmered beneath a streetlight.

They might be out there too. They could be watching us right this second.

“Maybe we should call the police.” Mom’s voice sounded thin. I’d suggested that earlier. After all, someone had broken in—well, broken out.

Dad snorted. “And tell them what?”

He had a point, but it’s not like there’s a rule book for dealing with visitors from other universes. Unless you attended *Star Trek* conventions.

“So what’s your plan?” I asked.

“I’ll get extra locks tomorrow. Maybe look into an alarm system.” Dad believed every problem could be solved with his Home Depot credit card.

“And shades.” Mom chewed the edge of a fingernail.

“What?”

“We need some window shades.”

He nodded, then turned to me. “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 me, and pain began pulsing behind my eyes.

Mom gave Dad a worried glance, then rested a hand on my arm. “It’s okay, honey. We don’t have to talk about it right now.” She smoothed my hair back from my face.

“No problem.” I brushed her hand away, sprawled back on the couch, and studied the ceiling. “It just seems like it was all a dream.”

“What’s the last thing you remember clearly?” Dad pulled his chair closer and watched me.

“Braide Wood.” I closed my eyes and smiled. “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 struggled to remember the rest. For some reason my memories were tangled up, like the time I had a major fever and took too much NyQuil. Mom and Dad waited.

“I went to see Morsal Plains with Tara. Brutal. The grain was all black, and it smelled weird. Tara told me about the attack—how Hazor poisoned it on purpose and how Susan the Restorer led the army to protect Braide Wood.” I squinted my eyes open and looked sideways at my mom. They’d told me she had ridden into battle with a sword. “Unbelievable.”

Even though she was watching me with a worried pinch to her eyes, she smiled. “I know. I lived it, and it’s hard for me to believe.”

“Anyway, I hiked 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. Said I'd run into bad company but he'd make it up to me. He gave me something to drink, and there was this lady. She was amazing." No matter how fuzzy my memories were, Medea was easy to remember: the long curly hair, the sparkling green eyes, the dress that clung to all the right places. My cheeks heated. "I can't remember everything we talked about. She made me feel important, like I wasn't just some teenage kid. It was . . ." I sat taller and angled away from my parents, my jaw tightening. "She helped me realize that no one else had ever really understood me. I wanted to become a guardian. I had an important job to do."

"Jake." Dad's voice was sharp, and I flinched. "The woman you met was a Rhusican. They poison minds. Don't trust everything you're feeling right now."

A pulsing ache grabbed the base of my neck. I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. Mom's hand settled on my shoulder, and I stiffened. Weird static was messing with my head.

"Jake, they used you to find the portal. She doesn't really understand you." Mom's voice was quiet and sounded far away. I felt as if I were falling away inside myself. She squeezed my shoulder. "Remember my favorite psalm?"

I managed a tight smile. "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 my smart-aleck tone, the words took hold, and some of the static in my brain quieted.

"What's the rest?" Dad pressed me.

What was he trying to prove? That I couldn't think straight? I could have told him that. I struggled to form the words.

“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.” Once I got started, I rattled off the verses by rote. In some strange way, the words actually stopped the sensation of falling away inside myself.

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

Mom didn’t move. She was still watching me. “How’s the hand?”

I rubbed my palm. “Still fine. Weird, huh?” I held it out.

A scar, faint as a white thread, marked the skin where broken glass had cut a deep gash an hour earlier. My heart gave a weird double-thump. What did it mean?

Dad shook his head. “Come on. Bedtime.”

Mom hesitated but then stood and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. “Good night, Jake. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Oh, great. She sure loved talking. I looked at Dad. His mouth twitched. “I’ll get us signed up for some practice space at the fencing club.”

Good. He hadn’t forgotten his promise. I couldn’t make sense of my trip through the portal or the sudden-healing thing, but I knew I wanted to learn to use a sword.

My parents gathered up the pizza stuff and carried it to the kitchen—out of sight but not out of earshot.

“If we hide the portal stones, Cameron and Medea won’t be able to go back,” Dad said over the crinkling of aluminum foil.

Someone slammed the fridge door shut hard enough to make the salad dressing bottles rattle. “We don’t want them running around our world. They don’t belong here.” Mom sounded tense.

“I know. We have to send them back. But on our terms. Without anything that would hurt the People of the Verses. And what about Jake?”

Silence crackled, and I leaned forward from my spot on the couch.

When Mom refused to answer, Dad spoke again, so quietly that I almost couldn't hear. “We need to keep the portal available in case he's needed there. But how will we know?”

Needed there? Did he really think . . . ?

I waited for them to head back to their bedroom, then slipped down the steps from the kitchen to the basement. Most of the basement was still unfinished, except for my corner bedroom and Dad's workbench.

I hurried into my room and shut out the world behind me. Tonight everything looked different—the movie posters, the bookshelves, the soccer trophy. Smaller, foreign, unfamiliar.

I pulled a thumbtack from my bulletin board and scratched it across my thumb. A line of blood appeared, but in a microsecond the tiny scrape healed completely. I had assumed the healing power was some heebie-jeebie thing that Medea had given me or that had transferred over from my interactions with Kieran.

But now that my head had stopped throbbing, I could put the pieces together. Excitement stronger than caffeine zipped around my nerve endings. My folks thought this was more than a weird effect left over from my travels through the portal. They thought I might be the next Restorer.