

## BROKEN



*“We stumbled down from the slopes of Stormridge’s mountains in a stupor, the bleakest of nightmares. I don’t know how long we all wandered without speaking, without stopping. The horror of all we had endured, all we had lost cut deeper than our hearts could bear.”*

*—Anargen’s King’s Day Journal  
18 Fómhar 1606 Middle Era*

**T**hrough the window, Anargen could see the trunk of an enormous tree felled by a recent storm. Its sorrow was his own. He sank down heavily onto the bed, continuing to look out. Removing his helmet, he rubbed his face and ran his fingers through the mess of his sweat-soaked hair, getting the dark strands out of his face. After days on the run with no rest and no chance to sit and reflect and grieve the unmendable wound he had suffered at Stormridge, he had come to the small town of Cattingsford. North along the Knight’s River from

Youngsland, it was the quiet chance for solitude he and his companions needed.

Like the tree outside, however, Anargen understood now that the initial wound that shattered the tree and the swift plummet were not the worst things it faced. Worst was laying there on the dampened grass, unable to right itself. Unable to mend itself. Laying there dying, decaying, never more to rise. Anargen was terrified that now might be that moment of catching his breath and facing his fall in full. He closed his eyes, willing himself to not think about it all, to just focus on his breathing.

A few moments later, he felt a hand wrap gently over his own. Without realizing it, he had been digging his fingers into the bed's sheet, handfuls of straw bunched in them, poking through to prick his bare hands. He had been imagining the damp mossy bark of the trunk, growing softer as toadstools, insects, and time ravaged it.

Anargen didn't need to look to know his comforter was Seren, but he did, and he wished he hadn't. In her sorrel eyes were the bottomless fathoms of compassion he had always been drawn to, and he knew in her love she ached for him. But he couldn't bear it now.

"You didn't come to dinner again tonight," she pointed out in the gentle nursemaid's tone she had taken when speaking to him since their escape from Stormridge. It was almost as painful to hear in her voice as if she had scolded and chided him for his malfeasance. She had tried that once as well. Reminding him that he was her fiancé and it was her duty to tend to him. In either approach, the underlying meaning was the same—his despondence was only serving to hurt her further. Strangely, this paralyzed him instead of galvanizing him to action. Other nights, he had simply sat there stoic, his

eyes fixed on the distance until she left him. More than once, tears were in her eyes.

“I still can’t face them,” Anargen croaked, his voice tight. He’d barely drunk anything since their escape, either. It hurt to speak, but he couldn’t bear it if she cried over him again tonight.

“The Knight Hall of this town has taken care of us,” she pointed out. “You can’t eschew their kindness anymore. They don’t deserve it.”

He looked at the floor, unable to hold her gaze. Her pale complexion seemed more so in the dim candlelight of the room, and he could see the tightness in her cheeks, the pursing of her lips. It wasn’t just the benevolence of the Cattingsford Knights he couldn’t keep turning aside.

“I know,” he managed to say, his eyes drifting back to the window and downed tree.

After several seconds of silence, she prompted, “Well?”

Turning his gaze to her again, he drew in a breath. It was then that he took stock of her more fully. Her long straight hair had been done into an intricate braid tied with a black ribbon. It matched the dark dress she’d been given. “You look beautiful,” he commented, speaking the first thought that came to him. “Your braid is lovely.”

She huffed out a sigh and blinked. “Thank you. You could have seen it better in the main hall, by the fire. It was lonely seated by myself.”

He nodded. “It was lonely on my walk. The townspeople don’t seem quite so happy to see us as the Knights here.”

“Some people are superstitious. Watching someone slowly killing themselves with sorrow isn’t often taken as a good omen.”

That got his attention. Was that really what he was doing?

All it took to confirm it was to look into Seren’s eyes and see there that she was already mourning him. Mourning a husband

she would have loved for a lifetime but never married. A life together that would have been like two vines winding about each other, supporting one another, bound together, more one than two. He had already buried that happiness in his own heart, but he hadn't realized she was doing the same.

Anargen coughed, trying to work moisture into his mouth and failing. Voice raspy, he replied, "Then you won't be alone tomorrow. No more mourning."

Her brows raised. "Truly?"

"You have my word," he vowed and raised her hand to his lips. He was sure it must have felt more like shagreen than a lover's kiss.

The transformation was instantaneous all the same. Seren seemed to be filled where a moment ago she was empty. She stood quickly. "Well then, why wait?"

She gave a knock on the still-open door to the room. Apparently, it had been an agreed-upon signal because in came his father Glewdyn and Lady Lyncia, bearing with them plates of cured meat, hard rolls, blueberries, and early harvest winter greens. Two flagons of a warm beverage, perhaps a cider, were included. The meals were sat on the small table bearing Anargen's lone candle.

Before heading back to the hall, Glewdyn bent down and gave him a tight hug and a kiss on the top of his head. If Anargen could have cried, seeing his father's expression through the whole thing would have brought tears.

"You can stay if you like," Seren called to Glewdyn and Lyncia. "Even here, it is proper to have chaperones."

Turning to Anargen, she added, "You aren't wrong about the townspeople disliking us. Something is going on, and there is no need to add to their gossip by flouting social mores."

Propriety aside, Anargen would never take advantage of Seren. But it was a moot point. Drinking the steaming apple

cider with slow, purposeful sips, Anargen nodded. Try as he might not to, the cider was quickly downed, and with it, all the food. Seren was much more dignified in her eating, so he spent the next several minutes watching her, not speaking, just taking time to appreciate her presence. Occasionally, he would spare glances up at Glewdyn, who had one of his equally quiet grins that spoke louder than any wine-spirited revel. Even Lady Lyncia's sharp old eyes and tight-lipped reservation seemed softened for this moment.

After several minutes, Seren finished, and they shared a low conversation. Light. Distant from everything that had happened and from the future. Mostly about the growing of winter greens, grinding grain at a mill, and the kind women of the Hall who had helped Seren with her hair and clothes. Occasionally, Glewdyn or Lyncia would offer an anecdote or comment. Until an hour later, Anargen felt the stirring of something akin to happiness threatening to crack through the ardent defenses of his despair. He did not resist and treasured giving Seren a goodnight kiss. When he lay down after all had left, he knew he would sleep tonight without the terrors that had woken him every night prior. And if they did threaten his dreams, he could bear them.

But he stirred awake, and it seemed to him he had not been asleep for more than a few minutes. Though he knew that wasn't true. The candle was out, and the room was full dark, with the only light being stars shining through a haze of clouds. That and the burning blade of his father, as he stood over him in full armor, shaking him awake.

"Get up, son," Glewdyn instructed, no room for disagreement in his tone. "We have to go."

"What's happening?" Anargen asked, groggy as he struggled to strap on his armor with drowsiness-hampered hands.

“The townspeople,” was all Glewdyn replied by way of explanation. “Bertinand is bringing Seren and Lady Lyncia. Caeserus and Sir Kyreneas are gathering the others.”

As soon as Anargen strapped on his spiritsword and picked up his shield, Glewdyn stepped around him to the wall with the window. Plunging the fiery sword into the wall, he cut the opening much wider, section by section, taking the smoldering pieces and setting them aside quietly. The others appeared at the doorway to the room, with Seren rushing over to clasp Anargen in a quick embrace.

“It’s going to be okay,” Anargen soothed, even though he hadn’t the faintest notion if he could guarantee such to be true.

“Now, son,” Glewdyn insisted. “Go.”