



*“The Monarch’s forces are as determined as they are dangerous. Port Jarreth’s defense is essential to defending Libertias’s interior lands, and may not be enough. No. I promised to always be honest, especially in what I write.
It IS NOT enough.”*

*—Anargen’s King’s Day Journal
15 Gladiol 1610 Middle Era*

When a hand was offered to help him up, Anargen gladly accepted the aid. His heart and hand—all of him—felt heavy, weighed by the burden of what lay ahead. “Thank you.”

Terrillian grinned. “You’re one of the few Knights of Light who still kneel to make your pleas to the High King. It draws some stares.”

“Really?” Anargen regarded his fellow Knight with brows raised. Terrillian’s all-too-rare smile broke on his face, which had a long scar along the jawline from a battle nearer the war’s beginning. His taut, almost hollowed cheeks and shaved head made for quite the contrast to Anargen’s long, wild dark hair and gentler expressions. Both were about twenty now, a fact that still seemed impossible, and yet completely real. They had endured much in their short lives—all the more since pledging oaths of loyalty to the High King of All Realms.

“Indeed, quite a few eyes on you, especially among the others about our age ... and younger.”

Earlier in his time as a Knight, Anargen might have been self-conscious and looked to see who had watched him. “Good. Perhaps it will help clear the path for them to have the vision as well. There are so few of us now, and the need is so great.”

Clapping him on the back and giving Anargen’s shoulder a shake, Terrillian chuckled. “You haven’t changed a bit since I last saw you. I’m glad for that. This war has been costly enough without losing ourselves to it.”

Anargen followed as his long-time friend led the way out of the forebuilding and into the quadrangle. A long double column of soldiers marched ahead, most on foot. They were moving through the inner and outer wards toward Port Jarreth’s castle’s gatehouse to take up positions along the sea walls. He felt favored by the High King to have his friend at his side once more, to march into this fight with him. Terrillian from Black River hadn’t been lost to the horrors and hardships they’d each endured. That in itself was more than Anargen dared hope for.

“You’re awfully cheerful, given the blockade around the port is being reinforced and an attack is almost certain,” Anargen commented, wishing he could project the ease that Terrillian was right now.

Some of the brightness of Terrillian’s expression slipped. He shrugged. “Well, we both knew this day was coming. If the Monarch wants to get to Kirke, this is the most direct staging point for that campaign.”

“Exactly.” Anargen glanced over his shoulder, hoping to catch sight of Seren or his father, Glewdyn, on one of the towers or ramparts. It always gave him extra drive having a visual reminder of what and to whom he was returning after a battle. As expected, this time was different. He tried not to

begrudge them for it. “We know what is at stake and have both been fighting this war long enough to know the depths of darkness our foes belong to and wield without hesitation. After what happened at Castle Letolk, it will be hard to stand against—”

Terrillian gripped the hilt at his belt, glancing both ways as they passed outside the castle’s gatehouse. In one swift flourish, he drew his weapon. Before he brought it around fully, the lettering on the blade glowed, and fire traced its way up the spirit sword’s length, its rush of heat and sudden brilliance sent tingling through Anargen’s length.

“Point made,” Anargen allowed. Even being Palatini Lucis Aeternae, Knights of Light, with divinely empowered armor and implements of the High King of All Realms, there was no getting around the hard reality. The odds were not in their favor in the long term. Outnumbered many to one. The Libertian weapons here in Port Jarreth were damaged from the last attack, as were the walls. Worst, the Monarch resorted to darker sorceries that filled battlefields with werebeasts and mindless, unyielding carrion soldiers, who continued marching onward, even as their bodies were destroyed, not stopping until they had torn their targets apart.

“It’s too bad we don’t have Sir Thomas here with us,” Anargen added. The young Ecthelish Knight had been instrumental in thwarting Monarch Ilyron’s assassination attempt on Libertias’s Viscount. His aid now would have been appreciated, but he was busy serving Ecthelowall’s Restoration armies in Albaron by guarding those essential to the war’s success. On Thomas’s mission hung the hopes to restore Viceroy Ecthelion, the leader of the Commonwealth, to Ecthelowall, before the power-hungry Monarch consumed it, Libertias, and all of the western Lowlands.

Terrillian's brows knit for an instant. "I thought you were going to say Caeserus and Bertinand."

Anargen's gait faltered. He still hadn't had the heart to tell Terrillian what had happened after their mentor, Sir Cinaed, sacrificed himself in Stormridge. It was hard enough to tell Terrillian of that, but the fact that the other two teens from their original group of four had abandoned the Quest hurt too deeply to share. How had he ever thought life in Black River was difficult at all compared to this?

The other Knight huffed. "But we'll make do ... or Libertias will fall."

"Oh, well, given those options." Anargen rolled his eyes.

Terrillian jabbed Anargen's shoulder pauldron. His armor of an easy smile was once more in place.

An instant later, they both walked out onto the sea walls around the port. The echoing report of distant cannon fire reached them, obliterating the coast's peace. An enormous fleet stretched ahead, flying the black and green flags of the Monarch and utterly outgunning the defensive squadron of ships assigned to Port Jarreth. Whoever thought that Bonus Mare was the more likely point of attack for the Monarch after his last costly defeat here had made a gross miscalculation. When the last of the defensive ships sank, their failure was made complete.

Soon, terribly soon, the towering frigates and carracks of the Monarch would be in firing range on the port. There was no repelling this amount of firepower. Even the best defensive points for the port would be smashed to dust by a fleet this large. The banter between Anargen and Terrillian earlier about the danger to them from the Monarch's forces suddenly felt crude and profane. Everything tragic they had discussed was much more real, more likely to come to pass now.

“Sometimes I wonder if we’re meant to win this war,” Terrillian mumbled, his earlier humor stripped away.

Anargen glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, weighing whether or not to say anything. No, this wasn’t the time to bring up arguments he’d had with his father. “We can’t think that way,” Anargen replied, clearing his throat. “Not if we’re going to stand a chance in this battle.”

A rush of heat enveloped Anargen on the breeze, startling him. Riding on the wind was a whisper, which pulled his attention away from the imminent attack by sea and far into the distance. At first, all he saw was the castle and city of Port Jarreth. But he felt strangely pulled away.

Neither sensation nor focus was foreign. The timbre of the summons—its gravity and magnificence—was very familiar to him. Treasured by him. Rather, it was the strength of the pull from this place, this moment, that took him aback. As if he shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t be fighting this battle.

And yet, that couldn’t be true, because where else could or should he be but on the front lines? Stopping the evil armies of the Monarch from snuffing out the wick of the one remaining western Lowland nation still fully sovereign over its domain and still committed to liberty, justice, and truth—all of which he knew the High King prized. Still, he could not escape it. The draw to be elsewhere. Far from here by so many leagues.

What are you telling me, my King?

“Anargen?” Terrillian gave his shoulder a sharp shake. “Are you well?”

Blinking, Anargen was pulled in two different directions. “I, uh, I think so.”

Terrillian chuckled, but with an edge of concern to the sound. “Yeah, well, you’d better *know* fast. The Field Marshal is about to address us all.”

That grabbed his attention. Count Forsmythe of Jarreth County had been given command over the Libertarian armies of the coast. Anargen had never met him, but a host of superlatives were attached to his name, including valorous and ingenious. If anyone stood a chance to claim the title Viscount from Gerialian in the next council of counties when this conflict ended, it would be Forsmythe.

Anargen felt an almost boyish eagerness to hear the Field Marshal speak. To be one of the few who could look back and say he'd heard his address and was there at this pivotal moment in the Lowlands' history. A part of him understood how foolish he was being, given that he had been granted the vision of the High King of All Realms, heard His voice, and experienced the edges of his fiery presence.

Now Anargen felt abashed. All the same, he drifted after Terrillian, heading toward the seawall—against the pull he felt from the Highlands and its Lord. His Lord.

Forsmythe was already standing atop a hastily erected platform. A crowd of Libertarian soldiers—dark blue tunics with their gleaming silver armor looking like sun-crested waves—surrounded the vaunted leader. The anticipation rolling over the gathered was palpable. This man and what he stood for could sway the battle. His words could rally them now to overcome what looked to be a sure defeat. He had done so at the Siege of Tenchford, where he earned his legend and cemented his title and command.

“Men of Libertias! Dawn greets us on shores that soon will be hallowed by the courageous defense we must mount. Our enemy's ships are moored just off our nation's coast. An enemy so despicable, its own people are determined to thwart it at the cost of their lives.

“It is no small irony that the enemy is the resurgent Monarchy of Ecthelowall. The very viper your forefathers

struck down to craft the country we have been nurtured and protected by. Libertias, the bright and shining beacon of justice and freedom, a tower looking out onto the Lowlands—”

A twinge of hot anxiety seared Anargen’s chest. His eyes instinctively flicked toward the Highlands. A “beacon.” A “tower.” The very things he, Terrillian, and the others had been summoned from Black River to defend. The same Tower of Light spoken of in oracles by Thane Ormand of Ordumair in the far north, centuries before. Naturally, the proposition that Forsmythe’s words sat before him had to be considered. The “shining beacon” and the “tower,” was it truly Libertias? Was Libertias the Tower of Light they must defend?

“... which might light and guide the Lowlands for a thousand generations. Or it may fall in this Era. In this war. On this day.” Forsmythe paused his speech, letting the words seep into the sinews of his hearers. Anargen felt his natural impulse to deny it, to reject it, well up within. Even as another voice pointed out that every nation of the Lowlands ends. Only the High King’s would never end.

Forsmythe began again, his voice dropping an octave into a cold and gruff register. “No. It will not.”

A wild cheer rang out from the assembled. Forsmythe drew his ceremonial rapier, lifting it high to glint in the sunlight. “No. It will not fall. Not Port Jarreth. This County. Libertias. Not ever! Our forefathers spilled their blood to forge this nation, and now we will safeguard it till the last drops of our own. So when our children’s children look back, they will feel the same swell of pride and comfort that on this day, in this place, the beacon of freedom and justice was not extinguished. It burned on and set ablaze those who would dare defy its righteous justice and the inalienable freedoms for which it was founded.”

The raucous cheer built in volume and verve to a feral roar

of defiance aimed at the Monarch's ships floating in the choppy waters of the Muiruaine Sea. Dark lines of seaweed drifted in bands on the waters, agitated by a recent storm. These appeared to rise and fall with the pumps of Libertian soldier's arms. The very stones of the wall on which they stood seemed to vibrate with the resonance of their zeal. It was infectious and exhilarating, and Anargen ... grew more and more torn. Every whoop and shout of victory and valor only scored deeper a wound he perceived himself receiving.

A whisper powerful in its subtlety gripped Anargen's attention. The whisper demanded he fall back, that he leave. Now.

Why, my King? Why can't I celebrate this? Don't you allow nations to rise, and Libertias above all the others? You favored it so! It was born from Ecthelowall. The secession of Libertias is what paved the way for the Commonwealth of Ecthelowall to replace its cruel Monarchy. We've been estranged, but amicable with the Commonwealth since, and with this war, we now link arms as brothers. Is this not the Tower of Light that you've been drawing us to safeguard?

Silence was his answer. And a wave of unease—of something being amiss both within and without—so potent he thought he might collapse. Holding his head and drawing in shaking breaths, he barely caught Count Forsmythe announce over the chants for victory, for Libertias, and for the Count, “Now, men of Libertias, stand at the ready. Your company commanders have my orders. Form up on them and receive the pathway to triumph.”

Anargen's discomfort doubled with the bombastic, almost frantic outpouring that followed. He felt like he'd been cast overboard, and every shout was another wave slapping him in the face, stealing away the air from his lungs. Spots danced in his vision, and he knew he was going to collapse.

The Unending Light

He tried to take a step as those around him dispersed, and he staggered. A strong arm shot out and steadied him. Terrillian's. "Are you well? I know you're not a sailor, but you really don't need sea legs to stand by the shoreline."

"I, uh, I ..." A new shout went up all around, but Anargen could scarcely make it out. His vision went dark, and he fell.