



“Why did I resist? Is this my punishment for defying the High King, or was it an attack by the darkness to keep me from being of aid? After so many trials endured, I’m still struggling to find the correct way forward.”

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

“**T**he Tower of Light ... must defend ... it’s ... it’s ...” Anargen struggled against the dark. “No! It cannot fall!”

He bolted upright, the cold sweat of a fever dream running down his temples. Anargen looked around, his heart pounding. Under him was a simple bedroll, and someone stood at the doorway to the small stone room he was in.

“Anargen!” Seren called out and was at his side a moment later, holding his hand with the ferocity of love nearly doomed to be fate-spoken.

Words eluded him for a moment, and he put an arm around his fiancée, drawing her close. She felt so warm, even through his soaked tunic. With her was also the familiar fragrance of honeysuckle that he treasured so much. It was the scent of memory and Black River, their hometown.

The soothing balm of her closeness, however, was not the bulwark against his distress that he needed. Cold air assaulted his flesh, sending shudders through him. The dream, the vision.

Whichever he had just experienced was so vivid, so immediate, he couldn't yet be sure he was beyond the borderland between domains of the body and the mind.

He felt Seren's other hand gently brushing back the damp, black strands of his hair. She placed a quick, gentle kiss on his forehead. "Speak to me, my love. Are you hale?"

No, he wasn't well. Seeing the panic in her warm brown eyes almost convinced him to lie, to deflect her concern. But he could not. The will to deceive was so far removed from him, having been pinioned to the truth for what felt like days without end. "I saw it being attacked. From a distance. I felt like I had to help, but I couldn't ... I ... it's going to fall. It's going to fall, Seren."

"Shh," she said soothingly, moving to wrap her arms around him in a comforting embrace. She seemed to absently remember something she had been planning to do a moment earlier and let go of him just long enough to retrieve a cool, damp cloth. She applied it to his forehead and resumed her comforting lilt, "I know. They've taken the seawall and are sending their troops into the city below. If Count Forsmythe's replacement does not sound the retreat soon, then we'll all be taken when the castle falls."

Anargen blinked, his eyes fixed on the distance, suddenly regaining awareness of his surroundings once more. "What? What do you mean?"

Seren's brows furrowed, and she gnawed at her lower lip as if struggling to decide whether he could bear what she had to say. "Port Jarreth is going to fall."

The words, so brief, were weightier than the stones of the castle around them. "It's going to fall?" he asked, feeling it difficult to breathe again.

She swallowed hard. "You were out on the seawall with the others when the Monarch's forces surprised us all. They'd

drifted some explosives along on the beds of seaweed and kelp washing ashore. They detonated them and damaged the seawall, along with injuring many troops. You among them.”

“What?” That wasn’t at all what he remembered. “How did I get here?”

“Sir Terrillian brought you. You fell when the attack took place, and he thinks a chunk of stone must have hit you. Your *Perikephalia Sosterios* saved you.”

Reflexively, Anargen reached up to touch the helmet that had rescued him. Instead, his fingers found his bare head, and he compulsively tried to find and feel an injury he wasn’t sure he’d incurred. His head did ache, but that wasn’t what felled him. He was on the verge of defying the High King again. He knew it in that moment, right before things grew dark.

Sitting in silence for a moment, he understood the silence to be his bride-to-be wisely allotting him time to come to terms with the Lowlands he had awoken to—one far darker than the one he’d last seen. “You said, ‘Count Forsmythe’s replacement.’ What do you mean?”

Seren’s soft, round cheeks showed one of the deepest frowns he’d seen in months. “He was one of the first casualties of the surprise attack. The Monarchists may have even detonated their bombs earlier than planned because they saw him on the wall giving his rallying speech.” Her voice took on a haunted quality, “At least, that’s how it seemed to me when I walked out onto the parapets just before it happened. I saw it all unfolding. Every terrible moment, including when Terrillian drug you off ...”

Tears welled in her eyes, and Anargen rallied himself to hold her closer, transitioning from comforted to comforting. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry you endured that ...” He hesitated for a moment before adding, “It will be all right.”

She pulled back, sniffing and wiping away tears. “How can

you say that? I haven't even told you about your father and Terrillian being out there now, fighting to hold back the Monarchists."

That news sent a ripple of concern through him, but he knew he had to hold himself together for Seren. Who knew how long she'd tended him. From the slight droop to her eyelids, he could tell she was exhausted. Emotionally and physically. He had to be strong for her now. "There isn't a Monarchist in their whole army who can contend with either of them," he said, not having to feign his conviction on that point at least.

With a deft shake of her head, she dispelled it. "They're carrion. Every one of them. There wasn't a single normal soldier unloaded from those ships."

It was impossible to mask his initial revulsion at what she revealed. Even a handful of those held under the sway of the carrion curse could be trouble. Ordinary men, women, even children, transformed into mindless machines, bent upon ravaging whatever or whomever they were commanded to destroy. If they comprised the whole army, there would be thousands. How had the Monarch managed to conjure enough dark power to control so many at once? Count Eidolon had tried something of similar scale and only hastened his own demise. Perhaps the Monarch was the master and Eidolon the apprentice in the dark arts, or the student simply surpassed the master.

Whatever the case, things were far more dire now. As dire as the dream he'd just had. Leaning back from Seren, he looked at her intently. "I need my armor. I have to get down there to help the defense."

Her eyes widened. "No, you're not ready. You just woke up. You've been unconscious for a day. Who knows how severe your injuries are!"

“Seren,” he countered, his voice even and as gentle as a feather on the wind.

“No. I will not lose you now!” Her eyes filled with tears.

“You won’t.” He lifted her gaze to his. “Remember, we’ve talked about this. Finding a nice place, building a home, starting our family when the war ends. Growing old together in quiet and peace. Do you think I’m going to let the Monarchists steal that from us?”

There was a thoughtfulness in her eyes, and at last, she answered, “If you go to fight, I’m going with you. We’ve fought together when things were at their worst, and if Libertias’s army allowed women to fight, I would’ve been by your side through everything this past year.”

His brow briefly furrowed. Having her safely away from the battlelines had been something he’d greatly appreciated since they’d rescued Count Gerialian in Kirke. But she was right. Knights of Light, men and women, stood for the High King at his calling. Seren was going to be his wife, which meant they would share each other’s lives, including those moments when the Quest meant facing danger.

“There’s no one else in the Lowlands I’d rather have by my side,” he replied, squeezing her hand.

She returned the pressure and then was up in a flurry of motion, gathering their armor. No further words passed between them until each was fully suited. Which was for the best, because Anargen wasn’t yet steady as he worked to apply his own armor. Fortunately, they gave each other privacy to dress, so Seren hadn’t seen him struggle.

Gripping the hilt of his spiritword, Anargen felt the rush of warmth and with it the strength beyond himself he desperately needed. Deep inside, he knew that his blacking out and the intense visions he’d endured would need many hours of

contemplation to properly understand. Presuming they survived the castle's defense.

Anargen tightened the *Alethia*, the belt that held his armor together in surety and verity. Lifting his helmet's faceplate, he looked over at Seren. Her pronounced feminine curves, midnight hair, and quiet smiling lips were hidden beneath her armor that, like Anargen's, burned with the High King's fire, defining her a warrior for his honor. In spite of it, she was beautiful. Or perhaps it was because of what the armor obscured and declared that she was all the more beautiful to him. If he wanted his future wife just to be an attractive woman, there were plenty in the Lowlands. A woman who was devoted to the High King as through and through as himself, wise beyond her years, with such a tender heart and quietly fierce spirit? He knew all these only existed in her.

She caught him staring and her cheeks reddened. "You're looking at me like I'm in my bridal gown instead of armor for battle."

Try as he might, he couldn't help wincing at that. They would have already been married by now if not for the war. Every day it continued, every battle entered, and every new danger faced made it feel less and less likely they would both live to see the war's end. Along with the outer war, he thus fought an inner protracted one to banish such melancholy.

Removing a gauntlet, he tenderly brushed her cheek with his hand. "You are the most beautiful of all the High King's works. Whatever you wear, wherever you are, you embody every groom's dream for his bride in beauty, wisdom, and compassion. The day I truly see you in your wedding gown will rob me of all words, of my very breath."

Tears began to well in her eyes, and she held his hand to her cheek for a moment. The soft warmth of it was more precious to him than all the gold in the canyons of Aridgulch.

Her voice was tight when she pulled his hand away. “We must go. Whatever happens next ... I love you, always.”

“Always,” he agreed.

Sliding his faceplate down, he let her lead them down to the castle’s quadrangle. The few servants and others they found were bustling with anxious and aimless energy, unsure of what to do. Where to go. One maid clutched two young children close to her and winced at every sound of cannon fire.

Out in the courtyard, Anargen gaped. He could see well where the defensive line had been pushed to. It was within the inner wall. Townspeople streamed past as the keep’s gate opened to admit them. Interspersed were soldiers in the blue of Libertias who mostly tried to form back up into regiments in the courtyard, but were in such a disarray that some fell back with the people they needed to defend.

A cannon boomed in the distance and with it came a tremendous cracking sound. Anargen’s attention whisked to a billowing cloud of dust from where the shot had crushed stone inside the inner wall. Several more volleys sounded, and a five-foot section of wall crumbled inward.

Over the damaged wall they clamored—the carrion. Barely noticing the impact from the drop or worrying over the feat of scaling to the damaged point in the wall. They only cared about one thing: the death of everyone in the castle.

“I see Glewdyn,” Seren had to yell over the intensifying din around them. “It looks like he’s limping.”

Immediately, Anargen’s attention jerked from the breach to his father. The older man did seem to be struggling, and he half-carried Terrillian. The other Knight’s left arm hung limp at his side, and he seemed to be doing little of the work to escape the pressing danger.