

Chapter 1 – The World After Nothing

He didn't die like a hero.

There was no last stand, no cheering crowd, no noble sacrifice framed against a burning sky. One blink he was in a world of screens and late nights, and the next there was no body to hurt, no lungs to fill, no sound to cling to.

There was only softness.

Not darkness—darkness was still *something*. This was a gentler erasure, like someone was carefully rubbing him out of existence with the side of a thumb, trying not to tear the page.

Then something stirred.

At first he was everything. Then he wasn't.

The “everything” drained away until he was left with a smooth, featureless *nothing*—and then that nothing remembered it could move. It quivered. The quiver learned rhythm and became waves. The waves found a color: green, bright and insistent, like a heartbeat that had finally decided on a shade.

The color folded in on itself, tighter and tighter, until it stopped being an idea and started being *him*.

He drifted in a place that wasn't a place, aware of himself but not of where he ended. Thought didn't come as words. It came as pressure and hue—surges of emerald, the weightless weight of being, the distant gravity of something vast and patient watching him exist.

He was a pulse of green light in a sea older than time, expanding and contracting without breath.

When awareness sharpened, the world unfolded.

Not Earth.

A planet hung in his mind's eye, blue and green and cloud-swirled, but wrong in its outlines. Three great continents sprawled across it like sleeping beasts; seas glittered between them; faint networks of light traced trade and cities. It wasn't quite a map. It felt more like the planet had opened its eyes and let him look out through them.

His awareness fell.

Clouds parted. Coastlines rushed up. A vast coastal city bloomed beneath him like a crown at the lip of the sea—walls, towers, ships, smoke and banners and magic he could feel but not yet name. Something about it tugged at him, a gravity that had nothing to do with mass.

He sank toward one of the rooftops.

The air met him first: thin and cool, smelling faintly of salt and distant spice. Tiles scraped against... *something*. The sensation of weight slammed back into him in a bright, painful rush.

Light folded one last time.

Arken gasped and sat up.

He was human.

Plain. Naked. Heart hammering. The roof under him was cold and gritty, and a wind that smelled of salt and smoke slid between the buildings below. His skin prickled with chill and with the sharp, irrational awareness of being seen, even if nobody was looking.

He tried to speak.

The sound that came out wasn't his language. It was rounder, softer at the edges, full of rolled vowels and clipped consonants that bit his own tongue. Panic clawed at his throat. His chest rose and fell too fast.

For a moment he just sat there, hugging his knees, staring at hands that weren't light anymore.

The sadness hit him late, like a wave that waited until he had a shore.

His old life came back in pieces—his room, the glow of a monitor at 2 a.m., the way days blurred together into quests and matches and the comfort of being in control of *something*, even if it was only pixels. The hum of his PC. Worn keys. Lines of code that had once made his brain feel clear instead of crowded.

Faces flashed too. People he'd cared about. People he'd meant to call back. Messages he'd ignored because there was always tomorrow.

There wasn't.

His chest tightened. Not from physical pain—he wasn't sure pain could touch him yet. It was a weight sitting where his heart should be, made out of every ending that hadn't asked his permission.

Was he allowed to miss Earth?

If *something* had gone through the trouble of dragging him here and stitching him back into existence, was it ungrateful to wish he could hear the pathetic whine of an overworked GPU one more time?

He didn't know.

He only knew that he missed the familiar kind of tiredness. He missed having a place that was unquestionably his, even if that place had been a cluttered room lit by a single monitor and bad life choices.

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and forced himself to look down at the city spread beneath him.

If this was a new world...

Then he had to learn how to live in it.

Even if part of him still felt like a ghost who hadn't finished saying goodbye.

Instinct moved before thought.

A wordless search rolled out from him, like blinking in a place where eyes existed before he did. In his mind the world snapped into focus again—three continents floating in a private sky, oceans between them, coastlines and cities drawn with impossible clarity. The image was so perfect it felt like a memory someone else had left for him to borrow.

Far away, somewhere behind mountains and centuries, a handful of ancient mages jolted upright in their beds, choking on dread with no name for it. The sensation passed before their mouths could form a prayer. They were left sweating in the dark, convinced the sky had shifted and nobody else had noticed.

On the roof, Arken only knew two things.

One: he was not on Earth. Two: the vast coastal city below was real and very, very awake.

He was still trying to make his legs remember how to stand when the trapdoor creaked open.

A woman stepped out, balancing a basket of folded cloth on one hip.

She froze.

Her eyes traced him once, quick and weary—like she'd seen this kind of thing before and hated that it still happened. Naked man on roof. Too-bright eyes. Bad omen written all over it.

"Hey," she said softly in a language that rolled like river-stones. "Are you... safe?"

Arken blinked.

He didn't understand a word. He understood the tone: cautious, not cruel.

He bowed instead, deep and reflexive. Hands open, palms empty. When she didn't move, he bowed again—smaller, more desperate, pleading with posture because his voice was useless.

The woman's hair was green.

Not dye. Not light. Green like leaves when they first decide to exist. It fell in a rough braid over one shoulder, catching the morning sun and turning it into something unreal.

Arken's breath caught in a stupid, helpless way.

In his old life, green had just been a favorite color. Here it felt like a miracle attached to a person.

Her face softened the tiniest bit.

"Okay," she murmured. "Okay. Another rune-crafter gone wrong. Poor thing..."

She set the basket down and draped a long shirt and trousers over his lap, then added a wrapped bundle that smelled faintly of bread and eggs.

Her movements were careful and slow. Not trusting. Not afraid. Just kind.

Arken took the clothes like they were sacred.

He pulled them clumsily—limbs wrong, balance off—then stuck his hand out the way his world had taught him.

She hesitated, then shook it once.

Her grip was firm. A farmer's grip.

"Alina," she said, tapping her chest.

"Arken," he replied, tapping his. The name sounded strange and solid in this air.

She gave a small, resigned nod, as if the universe had just handed her another unpaid project.

Then she let him stay.

Not in the house—on the roof, where the sun could keep an eye on him and the city could pretend not to notice.

He made a shelter from a dirty rag and propped a wool pillow under his head at night. Every dawn, he tried to help.

Every dawn, he failed in a different way.

But he didn't stop.

Chapter 2 – Roof, Field, and Tea

The first morning he tried to help, he nearly killed a bucket.

He watched Alina milk the cow—calm, practiced, efficient—then took the stool when she moved aside and tried to copy her grip.

The cow tolerated exactly three seconds.

The stool tipped. The milk sloshed. Arken made a noise somewhere between a yelp and a cursed prayer as cold white liquid hit his lap.

Alina laughed.

It burst out of her, surprised and sharp, like she hadn't expected to find anything funny that day. She clapped a hand over her mouth too late.

"Sorry," she winced. "It's just—your face."

He looked down at himself, dripping and humiliated, then up at her.

Somewhere under the embarrassment, something eased.

They fell into a rhythm.

He hauled water. Slowly. Then without spilling. He learned how to patch fences, even if his first attempt made the neighbors stare and ask if the boards were supposed to look like they were losing a fight.

Alina corrected him without cruelty and without coddling.

“No, not like that. Here. You’re trying to brute-force it. Let the tool do the work.”

“If you stare at the chicken like that, it’s going to assume you’re a predator.”

“Don’t drink from that bucket. That’s for the pigs.”

Words came slowly.

He mimicked sounds like a kid learning music by ear, tried phrases, butchered grammar, watched her lips when she spoke and mirrored them until something clicked.

“Good morning.”

“Thank you.”

“Sorry.”

“Roof fine. I sleep here.”

Alina would nod, repeat, shave off his worst mistakes.

Some evenings, when the work was done and Hearthweave’s other small farms had gone quiet, she’d bring up two chipped cups of tea without comment.

One for her. One for him.

They’d sit on the roof, side by side, looking at Yoatha’s distant glow and the dark line of the sea. “This city,” he said one night, gesturing clumsily toward the glittering mass. “Name?”

“Yoatha,” she said. “Great city. Trade. Crowds. Too loud. Too many stairs.”

She spoke like someone who had gone often enough to hate the trip but not the place.

He nodded, tasting the word. “Yoatha.”

Her gaze drifted toward it, eyes catching reflections.

“My parents loved it,” she added quietly. “Especially the Archives. The big library.”

He perked up. “Books?”

“Books,” she confirmed. “ Spells. Histories. Lies. The usual.”

He didn’t understand the last word, but the way she said it made his neck prickle.

That night, when the tea was gone and the cup heavy in his hand, he found the courage to ask—slowly, in halting phrases.

“Parents... where now?”

Alina’s jaw tightened.

“Gone,” she said simply.

It wasn’t the word for death. It was the word people used when something had been taken without being returned. She didn’t elaborate. He didn’t push. They let the silence sit there between them, like a guest neither of them had invited.

Later that week, the world felt too quiet. No wagons. No neighbor arguments. No barking dogs. Just the creak of wood and the soft sigh of wind over fields. Alina lasted eleven heartbeats before throwing off her blanket and climbing the ladder to the roof.

Arken was already there, lying on his back, one arm over his eyes.

“You’re going to catch a cold up here,” she said.

He flinched, dropping his arm. “That doesn’t make sense,” he muttered automatically. “I don’t—never mind.”

She snorted and held out a second cup of tea.

He blinked, surprised, then took it carefully, like it might vanish if he moved too fast. Steam curled into the night air.

Below them, Hearthweave was a handful of candles in the dark. Yoatha was a soft, pulsing smear of orange on the horizon. The sea was nothing but a darker strip of nothingness.

They sat in silence for a while.

“Do you ever get scared it’ll all just... stop?” Arken asked suddenly, eyes in the sky.

“The world?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. This. The part where it’s... quiet enough to hear yourself think.”

Alina watched the road that had taken her parents away and never brought them back.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But then the cows need milking and the roof leaks and I decide to be afraid later.”

He huffed out a laugh.

“You’re bad at comfort, you know that?”

“Worked on me,” she said. “Still here, aren’t I?”

For reasons she didn’t want to examine too closely, the way his shoulders eased at that settled something under her ribs.

She stood, bumped his shoulder with her knee. “Don’t spill that on my roof.”

She climbed back down.

The house felt less empty when she closed her eyes.

And for the first time since she’d lost her parents, the thought of losing someone else scared her enough that she admitted it, if only to herself.

If he leaves too, this place is going to feel very, very loud.

Chapter 3

One morning the hunger for answers returned sharper than any appetite.

He stepped into Yoatha like a newborn.

The streets were alive—candied citrus and incense, sizzling skewers, fabric canopies snapping overhead.

The Crackerjack Market roared with bargaining and bells. Everywhere he looked, people wore the city like a second skin.

He turned once too many times.

The alleys narrowed. The voices changed. He saw scales before he saw knives.

They moved out of shadow in a loose circle—tall, lean reptilian folk with slick, river-stone scales that caught the light in greens and dark teals. Their heads were crowned with subtle crest-ridges like fins pressed flat, and their eyes were narrow, slit-pupiled, watching him with patient hunger. Long fingers ended in dark claws made for nets and blades alike. When they spoke, their language clicked and hissed softly, quick as water over gravel.

Arken lifted empty hands. No coin. No gear. Just confusion. The first punch landed like rain on stone.

He staggered, more from surprise than pain. Another hit. Something inside him kept expecting agony and never found it. His body took the blows without meaning, but his mind reacted anyway—anger blooming against helplessness. He tried to swing back and hit nothing but air. Too many. Too fast. A fist cracked against his jaw and he went down on one knee, breathless for no reason.

That's when Alina's scream cut through the alley.

“Stop! Hey! STOP!”

The sound hit the thieves first. Then the meaning.

Four scaled heads snapped toward her in the same breath, crest-ridges lifting, slit-pupiled eyes narrowing. The loose circle around Arken shifted, not like people turning, but like a single animal deciding it had found the softer target.

They scented her in the air—farm-sweat, soap, clean cloth—and every jaw tightened the same way. Claws that had been idly tapping against daggers or brick now flexed with purpose. One Argonian rolled his shoulder, vertebrae popping like knuckles. Another clicked his tongue once, a sharp little sound that meant something in their river-language Arken didn't know but his stomach understood perfectly.

Hunger. With legs. And math. They'd just decided she was the better payout.

Alina froze for half a heartbeat—just long enough for the realization to show on her face—then bolted, skirt and green hair flashing as she spun and ran.

Arken's heart flared...

Arken's heart flared—but not because he feared dying, but because the old, buried terror of losing someone again cracked open inside him like a coffin lid. For a heartbeat he was back in his past life, watching endings come too fast, watching people he loved slip away while he stood there helpless and late. The memory wasn't clear, but the feeling was savage.

"Alina!" he shouted in a language nobody around him understood.

The Argonians lunged.

The sound snapped off. Then motion.

A gull hung in the air with its wings half-open. A droplet of water froze mid-fall from a broken bucket. Alina was caught in a running pose, hair and skirt suspended as if the wind itself had forgotten how to breathe. The thieves were statues of intent—claws half-raised, mouths slightly open, eyes still sharp even while frozen.

Arken stumbled, expecting resistance or pain or *something* to explain this. But there was only silence and a strange, heavy calm, like the city had been dunked underwater.

He took a step.

Nothing moved but him.

He looked at his hands, then at the street, then at Alina's face locked in panic. A cold clarity slid into him: whatever this was, it wasn't a trick. It was him.

He crossed the frozen alley in a few long strides, grabbed Alina's wrist, and yanked her toward him.

The instant his skin touched hers, time collapsed back into motion like a snapped cord.

Noise exploded into place—Alina's gasp, the thieves' startled curses, the distant market roar. The world lurched as if it had never paused and Arken had simply moved too fast to see.

"Run," Alina breathed, eyes wide with a terror she didn't have words for.

Arken dragged her through a maze of streets he barely knew, his body moving on instinct, his mind lagging behind in shock. The Argonians shouted behind them, but their voices faded under the drum of his heart. Every breath felt like broken glass even though he wasn't wounded. Every muscle screamed a fatigue that didn't make sense—like the act of stopping the world had pulled something out of him that his human vessel wasn't built to hold.

By the time they made it back to Hearthweave, Arken's vision swam. His legs buckled on the roof tiles. The salt-and-spice air blurred.

He heard Alina calling his name—twice, maybe three times—and then his chest seized as if an iron fist had closed around his heart and collapsed.

Ultimate Search: Planetary Exiva.

Sunlight stabbed him awake.

He flinched, throwing an arm over his face, lungs dragging in air that tasted of dust and salt and wool.

The roof.

His roof.

Alina's rag-tent flapped softly beside him, held down by a brick that had seen better decades. Somewhere below, a chicken complained about something in the self-important tones only chickens had.

For a second he didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there.

Then it crawled back in.

The alley. The circle of Argonians. Alina's scream. The wrong, dead silence. Running. The iron hand around his heart.

He lurched upright.

“Alina...?”

He sat up too fast, scanning the roof, the yard below, the street beyond. No green hair. No voice. No footsteps.

His throat went dry. His mind filled in the worst thing it could imagine, because that was what fear always did to him. He had already lost too much once. He couldn't lose one more person in a world he hadn't even learned how to live in yet.

He closed his eyes and reached for her with everything he had.

Not a chant. Not a spell he understood. Just a desperate *instruction*.

Something inside him answered.

Green light bloomed behind his eyes. The world unfolded in his head like a map that had been waiting for him to look at it. Oceans. Borders. Mountains. Cities lit like embers. The three continents floated as cleanly as shapes on glass. He felt the spell stretching farther than anything should be able to stretch, and it didn't fight him. It *obeyed*.

Across the planet, ancient detection magic screamed. Great halls of power went silent. It wasn't painful. It wasn't even a threat, not in any way they understood. It was **scale**—a gravity so vast their magic folded inward out of instinct. Some fell to their knees alone. Some gagged.

Some clutched their loved ones without knowing why, because a primal thought rattled through them all:

Hold someone. Don't be alone when it hits.

In Yoatha, the stone itself trembled.

The King's Guard crumpled like puppets cut from string, armor clattering. The King and Queen passed out in their chamber, heads ringing with a pressure they couldn't name.

Down in the streets, non-mages felt a small shiver under their feet, like distant thunder under stone. They glanced around, shrugged, and went back to arguing over fish prices.

On the roof, Arken saw one answer.

A single point lit up near the city's outer ring, steady and familiar. **Alina**. Safe. Alive.

Relief hit him so hard his vision went white around the edges.

Then a calm voice spoke beside him.

"Incoming match found. Alina located in the farms of Hearthweave Borough."

Arken twisted around so fast he nearly fell. "What—who said that?"

Nothing. Empty roof. Empty sky.

The voice was in English. Clean. Familiar.

Like a system prompt slipped into the real world. “Hello?” he called, feeling insane. No answer.

His sight changed.

Heat bled into color. Walls thinned into outlines. People became silhouettes of living warmth moving through the city like lanterns. Far away, one shape glowed brighter than all others—a steady green-hot point that didn’t flicker.

Alina.

The name snapped into focus in his mind like a quest marker. For a dazed second he could only stare at it, half-hysterical. Somewhere, some cosmic dev must’ve decided to give him a “locate what you care about most” *function* and forgot to put in a *cooldown*.

He didn’t waste it.

Arken vaulted down into the street and ran.

He ran through Hearthweave’s stair-lanes, across the edge of The Crackerjack’s midday chaos, past carts and shouting vendors and startled citizens who barely had time to register a breathless stranger cutting through their world. He tried to dodge, tried to stay polite, tried to move like someone who belonged.

He failed at all three. His legs were too fast, his focus too sharp.

A fruit vendor stepped into his path.

Fruit scattered. A pot toppled. Arken hit the ground hard.

His palms hit stone.

A tight green shockwave snapped outward from the impact—silent, quick, and terrifyingly precise. The stone beneath him lit a faint pattern as if it recognized the contact. For one heartbeat, a district sub-rune woke, acknowledged him like a lock sensing its *key*... and then sealed again as if startled.

Arken didn’t notice.

The light sank back into the stone as quickly as it had appeared. Whatever ancient logic had recognized him as a key went back to sleep, muttering.

He was already scrambling up, already sprinting, already tearing toward the bright point in his vision.

He turned a corner and saw her through the crowd.

Alina stood by a fence at the edge of the farming ring, hands on her hips, squinting toward the road as if she'd felt him barreling in before she saw him.

"Arken?" she called, confused more than afraid.

The green glow around him died instantly, like something in him unclenched.

He slowed, breath heaving, and lifted his hand back in a shaky wave.

Alive. Safe. Here.

His knees wanted to fold—not from weakness, but from the sheer violent gratitude of it.

Behind them, Yoatha kept laughing, bargaining, cooking, studying, living.

Under them, the rune-city had stirred awake for the second time in eight hundred years.

And somewhere out in Saltwake, something ancient and luminous shifted in the sea-dark, finally certain the one it remembered had returned.

Chapter 3

A month passed like a long exhale.

Arken still woke some mornings expecting the hum of a fan, the soft tyranny of his alarm, the blue glow through a familiar door. Instead there was sun on roof tiles, the smell of soil, and Alina's voice calling him down for breakfast in a language that had started as noise and was now a half-finished song in his mouth.

They slipped into habits.

He woke before dawn. She pretended not to notice that he did chores before she could tell him to. He asked questions about magic and the city. She answered the ones that wouldn't get him killed.

His vocabulary grew without him noticing.

Greetings became sentences. Sentences became jokes. Jokes became arguments that ended with her smacking his shoulder and him laughing harder than he had in years.

Somewhere along the way, Alina stopped thinking of him as “the strange man on my roof” and started thinking of him as part of the farm’s load-bearing structure.

She didn’t say it out loud.

She also didn’t think too hard about why her chest tightened the night she woke to an empty roof and realized he’d gone to the city alone.

Now, walking side by side along the path back from Yoatha, the fields stretching golden around them, she kept stealing glances at him.

He looked... normal. A little paler than usual. More tired in the eyes.

She’d heard the stories whispered in the market that morning.

People who could feel mana are fleeing the city. Untrained kids crying for no reason. Old mages locking themselves in their rooms.

She didn’t connect it to him.

Not yet.

“How did you find me that day?” she asked suddenly, cutting through the silence. “In the market. Of all places. It’s the biggest one in the world.”

Arken answered faster than his old self ever would have.

“I was worried,” he said. “You should have told me.”

Alina snorted softly.

“Oh, so you’re responsible now?” She nudged him with her elbow. “Like how you remembered your lunch and remembered to tell me you were going to the library that day?”

It was a harmless joke.

It landed like a blade.

Arken’s expression went blank, the way a candle dies when someone closes a door. He didn’t respond. He stopped walking.

Her words didn’t hurt because they were cruel. They hurt because they were *normal*. Because they sounded like the kind of thing someone says when life is shared long

enough to become routine. He'd heard that tone before. He'd lived inside it. The memory rose up without warning—soft domestic moments, a voice from long ago, a hand on a shoulder, a life that had believed tomorrow was guaranteed.

Sorrow washed over him so suddenly his ribs forgot how to hold it. He looked up at the sky, too bright and perfect, and felt the ache of everything that ended without asking him. Tears slipped down his face.

Alina froze. Her smile vanished in panic.

"Arken—no, hey, it was a joke." She threw her hands up, flustered. "I know you were worried. I didn't mean... I'm sorry."

He wiped his face like he could scrub grief away. When he spoke, his voice shook.

"I'm married, Alina."

The words came out thin, but they filled the space.

"I was brought here from somewhere against my will," he added, fighting to keep his voice steady. "I didn't choose to be here."

Alina stared at him, confused knitting her brows.

"Brought here...?" she repeated. "By whom? Why would anyone—Arken, that doesn't make sense."

She wasn't angry. She was... unmoored.

Her steps picked up into a fast walk, the kind people do when they don't know where to put a heavy truth. Dust puffed under her boots. The fields on either side suddenly felt too open, too exposed.

Arken followed, silent, wiping the last of his tears away while trying not to get dragged back under by them.

He saw it then, from outside himself.

The way she'd opened her house, then her roof, then her routines. The way she'd stopped flinching when he moved too fast. The way she brewed two cups of tea without thinking about it. The way her laughter had shifted from startled to easy.

He was a stranger.

But he wasn't, not anymore.

And now he was dropping a whole other life at her feet with no proof and no way to show her the world that had claimed him first.

When they reached the farm gate, he spoke softly, almost apologetic.

"I promise I'll show you one day," he said. "I just... can't explain it now."

Alina's jaw worked.

There were a hundred things she could have thrown at him—accusations, disbelief, some sharp joke to crack the tension before it could settle.

She used none of them.

Instead, she nodded once, small and tight, like she was tucking his words into a drawer somewhere inside her that she'd open later when her heart had better armor.

"Alright," she said. "Later."

She pushed open the gate and went ahead of him, shoulders a little too straight, steps a little too precise.

Behind her, Arken lingered for a breath, staring at the fields, wondering how many impossible truths one small patch of land could hold.

He didn't know that somewhere, deep in the restricted stacks of the Verdant Archives, ink on old pages shivered, reacting to a familiar kind of green pressure that had brushed past the world once before.

He didn't know that in the capital city's highest tower, a queen was being revived with smelling salts, trying to smile through the memory of having her consciousness pressed flat by something she couldn't see.

He didn't know that on a distant continent washed in red lantern light, a demon ruler had just received a report with his mana signature attached to it and was smiling like someone who'd found a very interesting piece on the board.

All he knew was that he'd hurt the one person in this world who had given him shelter, and that he had no idea how to stop being two lives at once.

He followed Alina inside.

The roof would be there tonight. The tea too. The silence between them would be heavier.

And somewhere beneath Yoatha, the great rune that was the city waited, listening, feeling the Verdant Pulse beating just a little louder.

Alina Flashback

Before Arken arrived, Alina's life was made of stubborn ceilings.

Hearthweave wasn't cruel, but it was indifferent the way survival always is. The farm demanded everything: time, back, weather, patience. She had no family left—only neighbors who had known her parents since childhood, who watched her grow and tried to keep her from breaking when the world turned cold.

Her parents had been different.

Her mother was warm and practical. The kind of woman who could coax crops out of tired soil and joy out of tired people. She taught Alina how to milk cows, how to fix roofs before storms, how to keep going even when grief tries to take your legs.

Her father was quieter, a scholar of Defensive Tools of Arts who fell in love with **how protection could be written into objects and spaces**. He didn't fight wars. He studied words the way poets study language. At night, he'd trace small sigils into the wood beside Alina's bed—nothing loud, nothing dramatic. Just soft, steady shapes that hummed calm into the room.

"Walls can be kind," he used to tell her. "Even if the world isn't."

Then one season, both her parents vanished.

They had gone to the Verdant Archives to research **ancient runes**—dangerous history wrapped in beautiful ink. They never returned. There was no body, no letter, no closure. The city's answers were polite and thin:

"They were doing sensitive work."

"Scholars travel."

"Sometimes things happen."

Neighbors whispered a thousand theories—sealed stacks, forbidden texts, someone higher up shutting doors that shouldn't be opened. But there was never proof. And grief is expensive when you're farming alone.

Alina waited. Weeks. Months. A year.

Then she learned to survive with a hole in her chest. Depression gutted her early on, but the farm didn't care if she was broken. Hunger doesn't wait for healing. She carried sorrow in one hand and work in the other until they became the same thing.

Years later she found Arken on her roof, naked and lost and trembling like someone who had fallen out of reality.

Something in her recognized him before her mind did.

A pressure. A warmth. **The same “you are safe here” feeling** her father's bedtime sigils used to give her.

So she fed him. She clothed him. She let him stay on her roof.

Maybe it was loneliness. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was the quiet selfish relief of having another heartbeat near her again.

But it felt right.

Now, after the thieves and the frozen street and the way Arken had *moved like the world bent for him*, the thought of losing him clawed at her in ways she didn't want to name.

Is it love?

Or need?

She didn't know.

She only knew the question meant he mattered.

Present Day

Back in now, Alina leaned against the fence, voice gentle but guarded.

“It's okay,” she said. “We're practically strangers. You don't have to talk to me about your life.”

Arken wanted to say a hundred things. But he didn't want to say the wrong one.

So he said nothing.

And in that silence, something real settled between them.

Chapter 3: “Saltwake, Where the Sea Remembers”

Arken didn’t sleep much after that day.

Not because nightmares haunted him — he hadn’t earned those yet — but because waking felt like standing on the edge of something vast and unfinished. Some mornings he’d catch himself staring at his hands as if they belonged to a stranger. Other mornings he’d press his palm to his chest and wait for a beat that felt *real*, just to reassure himself he wasn’t still light pretending to be flesh.

He was grateful. He was confused. He was hungry for answers.

And the worst part was that he couldn’t even name *what* he was looking for. Only that it lived somewhere inside him — green and deep and quiet-loud, like a storm sealed in glass.

That curiosity grew teeth.

One evening, while Alina was stacking feed sacks in the shed, Arken stood on the roof and watched Yoatha’s skyline. The city glowed gold in the dusk. Far beyond the market towers and scholar spires, he could see the sea line cutting the world clean in two.

Saltwake.

The docks.

The place where the city touched the planet’s throat.

He didn’t know why the thought of it tugged at him, only that it did. The air there smelled different. Brine and smoke. The sound of water slapping wood. The way people moved when their life belonged to tides. Maybe that was enough reason. Maybe he just needed to put his feet somewhere that wasn’t this roof and ask the world what it knew about green light.

He climbed down to the yard where Alina was working.

“I want to go to Saltwake,” he said.

Alina paused mid-knot on a sack. “The docks?”

He nodded. Words came easier now, but not *easy*. He searched for the right ones. “I... want to learn. About me. Maybe books there too.”

Her eyes narrowed in thought, not suspicion. She was quiet for a moment, then sighed.

“You got lost near the Archives,” she reminded him gently. “Then you got jumped. Then you...” She trailed off, the memory still raw in her face.

Arken swallowed. “I will be careful.”

“Yes, well.” She tied the sack tight like she was tying her nerves shut. “You’re not going alone.”

He opened his mouth to argue.

She raised a finger before he could. “Don’t. I’m coming.”

There was no anger in it. No authority. Just a stubborn kindness that had survived too many lonely years.

Arken looked at her for a long second. Then he bowed slightly.

“Thank you,” he said. And meant it.

They reached Saltwake by late morning.

The city changed as they walked downhill. Streets widened, then opened into long plank-roads dyed dark with sea-spray and fish-oil. Buildings leaned toward the water as if listening. Sails hung to dry like giant pale leaves. The air was thick with salt, smoke, tar, and spice. Somewhere a bell clanged. Somewhere a gull screamed like it was being paid by the hour.

Argonians moved through it like they owned gravity.

They were taller on average than the humans Arken had seen in Hearthweave, lean and rope-strong, their scales slick and patterned like river stones — greens, teals, and muddy blacks that shimmered when the sun hit right. Crest-ridges crowned their heads, subtle as pressed fins. Their eyes were narrow, slit-pupiled, always watching. Long fingers ended in dark claws that could mend nets or open throats with the same calm efficiency. They spoke among themselves in clicking hisses that matched the rhythm of water over gravel.

These weren't alley rats.

These were fisher clans.

Men and women built from tidework and survival.

Alina wandered toward a stall where a pan hissed with oil. A vendor was smashing fried plantain rounds, dusting them with salt and a red-white slaw that smelled sharp and creamy.

"Salty Tostones," Alina said, like she was saying a prayer. She bought two, handed one to Arken.

He took a bite and blinked.

Cheap and crispy, sea-salted just right, slaw sweet-tangy with a lazy drizzle of mayo and ketchup. It was the kind of food you eat when you're poor, tired, and alive — and it somehow makes you feel like all three are okay.

Arken ate quietly. Alina watched him like she'd done something right.

Then the shouting started.

Not close. Not far. Just... threaded through the docks like a problem everyone was too used to.

"Nets again!"

"Three this time — torn clean!"

"It's that sea-ghost!"

"No, no, it's the *curse*."

"Quit whining and mend 'em."

Arken turned.

A cluster of Argonian fishers were gathered on a pier, dragging in a wet net that looked like it had been shredded by teeth too fine to be natural. Not sliced. Not ripped.

Shredded. Like something had combed through it with intent. The fish inside were gone.

One old Argonian — her crest ridges scarred white with age — spat into the sea and hissed a curse under her breath.

"It started weeks ago," Alina murmured beside him. "Right after some big quake, I think. They've been angry ever since."

Arken's stomach tightened.

He didn't say anything. But something in him moved, like a tuning fork being tapped softly from very far away.

He felt it again — that pressure. Not dread this time. **Recognition.**
A low hum under the pier, under the water, under the world.

His vision prickled. The air tasted faintly metallic.

Not a spell.
Not a chant.
Just... a sense.

Arken stepped closer to the water. Alina caught his sleeve. "Careful." He nodded, but his feet didn't listen. The pier creaked beneath him as he walked to its edge. The sea below was dark, not because it was dirty but because it was deep. The sun scattered on its surface like shattered coins.

The hum grew stronger.

A fisherman noticed him staring.

Argonian. Younger. Wrapped in algae-green cloth and salt-white rope. He looked Arken over, eyes pausing just a fraction too long on Arken's faint green aura.

"... You lost?" the Argonian asked in rough Common.

Arken blinked. "No. Just... listening."

The Argonian frowned. "Listening to what?"

Arken opened his mouth. He didn't have an answer.

Because the truth was strange even to him — that the sea felt *alive* in a different way around him, as if it knew a name it hadn't spoken in centuries.

He looked down again.

The water shifted.

Not with waves. With *attention*.

A shadow moved beneath the pier. Too smooth for fish, too deliberate for current. Something vast slid past the pilings as quiet as memory. For a second Arken thought he saw a flicker of green — not on the surface, but deeper, like a submerged lantern.

Then it was gone.

The hum eased like a breath held too long.

Arken stood frozen, heart thumping. He didn't know why his hands were shaking.

Behind him, the fishers kept cursing and mending their ruined nets, unaware that something old had just turned its face toward the world.

Alina tugged lightly at his sleeve again, trying to pull him back to normal life.

"Arken?" she asked softly. "You okay?"

He swallowed. Forced his breathing steady.

"Yes," he lied, because he didn't have words for the truth yet. "Just... the sea is loud."

She gave him a small uncertain smile, accepting that answer because she had no other choice. Arken let her guide him away from the edge.

But as they walked, he kept glancing back.

Because he knew two things now.

One: whatever lived under Saltwake was real.

Two: it had noticed him.

And deep in the sea-dark, something ancient and luminous was waking on purpose, not by accident, like it had been waiting for this green signature to return since the day the heavens fell silent.

"Jean of Saltwake" (Milestone 6, Junction Scene)

Jean hadn't slept cleanly since the Pulse.

Even in the academy dorms—stone thick enough to mute storms and gossip—his dreams kept scattering like fish when a shadow swam too close. Every corridor of the Luminarium Ward felt tighter lately. Every teacher spoke softer. Every senior scholar carried that same haunted calm people wear after surviving something they can't explain.

Jean was Argonian, born to Saltwake's tide-breathing clans, but honed in Yoatha's schools until water listened to him the way loyal hounds listen to a master. S-tier water magic, they called it in the back halls with half-jealous awe. The truth was simpler: he

loved water the way some people love fire—because it never lied about what it was. It could be gentle, it could be lethal, but it was always honest.

He used to swim every off-day. Used to vanish into the sea with a smile, come back smelling like salt and peace.

Lately, there have been no days off-days. The academy had gone rigid after the Great Pulse, locking schedules into feverish intensity. Detectors were being tested. Wards re-examined. Coastal sigils checked twice. Even the battle-mages looked pale. Everyone was on edge, and nobody would say why aloud.

So Jean requested leave.

Not for rest.

For his mother.

She lived in Saltwake still, tucked behind the pier roads in a house that had survived flood seasons and old grief alike. She had taught him his first water-chants when his crest ridges were still soft. She had been his first sea. If the world was shaking, he needed to see her with his own eyes.

He arrived a day after the docks had begun whispering again.

The door hadn't even closed behind him before his mother broke.

She threw her arms around him like she was afraid he'd dissolve if she blinked, her scales cool against his heated skin, her throat making that tight Argonian sound that meant pain without words.

"Oh, my dear son, I thought something might happen before I saw you," she said, voice cracking. "Did you feel that?"

Jean rested his chin briefly on her head, arms wrapping around her. For just a moment, he let himself be her child again and not the Academy's "Master of Tides."

"Yes, Ma," he said quietly. "I felt it."

Her claws dug lightly into his back. "It was like... the sea forgetting how to breathe."

"I'm here, mom," he said softly. "I'll stay with you for now."

They made breakfast the way they always had—simple and warm. Smoked fish, sea-herbs, fried roots, a thick broth that tasted like childhood. They ate at the low table by the window while gull shadows slid over the floor.

And they spoke about what everyone was trying not to speak about.

“Scholars still don’t know what it was,” Jean said. His voice stayed calm on purpose. “Some say a ward failed. Some say a relic woke. Some say...” He paused, then shook his head. “No one is sure.”

His mother stared into her bowl like it might answer her. “People are panicking. Selling homes. Selling boats. Leaving.”

He exhaled through his nostrils, slow. “Yes. They think distance is safe.”

“And is it?”

Jean didn’t answer right away.

“After the Pulse,” he said carefully, “people across Yoatha sold their assets and tried to move inland. Same thing happened in the other continents. Everyone thought it was local... until they realized it wasn’t.” He lifted his eyes to hers. “The markets crashed when they learned it was global.”

She clicked her tongue in the Argonian way of cursing fate. “So even if I leave, they leave too. Even the forests. Even Red.”

“Yes,” he said. “Fear travels faster than ships.”

She sighed and leaned back, exhausted by helplessness.

Jean reached across the table and placed his hand over hers. “You’re not helpless. I’m here. I will protect you. And I will find out what actions can be taken. I don’t quit, you know that.”

Her eyes softened, but the worry didn’t fade. It never does. It only learns how to sit quieter.

When the sun climbed higher, she stood and tilted her head toward the door.

“Come,” she said. “We should swim. Like the old times.”

Jean blinked, surprised by the offer.

Argonian culture said swimming with loved ones kept bonds strong, because water was the essence of life. If your relationship couldn't breathe underwater, it wasn't healthy enough for the tide.

He smiled despite himself. "Yes."

They went to a familiar inlet beyond the busiest piers, where the water was clear enough to show the sand ripples below. Jean stripped down to his waist cloth, inhaled, and dove into the sea with his mother beside him.

Water wrapped him like a memory.

For a few minutes it was everything he missed—weightless, quiet, honest. He swam slow alongside her, crest ridges cutting through the surface as they laughed softly and dove shallow, hunting little silver schools the way they used to when he was young.

Then the water changed.

Not temperature. Not current.

Mood.

Jean felt it first in the way the sea seemed to tighten around him, like a muscle flexing without warning. A disturbance. Subtle, but deliberate.

His mother's head snapped up. "Jean," she hissed urgently. "Out. Now." She scrambled toward shore, scales flashing in the sunlight. Jean hesitated. Curiosity was half his blood. Bravery was the other half.

He watched her climb out, then took one breath and dove.

The world grew green-blue and hushed. The pressure rose. The water thickened into a cold silence. Jean's lungs didn't fight it—Argonian bodies were built for depth up to a point, adapted to breathe and hunt underwater where others would drown in panic.

He scanned the dark below for shape, fin, tooth—

And saw none.

What he saw was **Green Gas** moving like an organism.

Not bubbling. Not drifting.

Swimming.

It pulsed through the water in slow, intelligent curls, as if something without a body was passing through the sea using will alone. The glow was faint, but unmistakable. Jean froze in place, stunned.

Then a second sensation hit him like a wave inside his skull.

Mana Pressure.

On the shore.

He turned his head and *felt* it before he saw it, like a mountain casting its shadow through magic instead of light. A figure stood at the edge of Saltwake's planks—human-shaped, ordinary in silhouette... and yet the aura around him was a terrifying sky-wide column.

Arken.

Jean had never witnessed mana like that.

No one had.

It wasn't just strong. It was **infinite** in scale, pouring from Arken like breath. The aura rose so high Jean felt it scrape the heavens, and it spread wide as a ship's length around him. The inner core burned pure lime green. The outer edges faded into a darker, military green, layered like storm clouds in a bowl.

It was overwhelming.

Not because it pressed to kill—

But because it existed in a category that reality didn't even have a name for.

Jean stared, lungs forgetting they were underwater.

Her mother's voice echoed from shore, distorted by panic: "JEAN! OUT!"

He didn't answer.

He rocketed up to the surface like he'd been shot from the deep, gulping air hard enough to hurt. He stumbled onto the planks dripping sea-dark water, eyes wide, shaking like he'd seen the end of the world.

His mother grabbed his arms. "What did you see?"

Jean couldn't form the words at first. His throat clicked uselessly.

Then he found his voice.

"Mom," he breathed, staring at Arken from a distance as if looking directly might burn him, "we have to leave. Now."

Her eyes narrowed. "Jean—why?"

He swallowed, still half-drowning in what he'd felt.

"Because that man..." His voice lowered into something like awe and fear mixed together. "That aura was **Godly**."

No one had ever witnessed something so beyond classification. Not in the academy. Not in the oldest runes. Not in bard-songs. Not even in the sealed fragments whispered about in the Verdant Archives.

Jean pulled his mother close, already guiding her away from the waterline.

Behind them, the sea continued to breathe—

And the green thing beneath Saltwake swam in slow circles, aware that another pair of eyes had finally seen it.

Chapter 4 (continued) — “Eyes on the Docks”

Jean stayed in the shadow of the crates long after the human and the green-haired woman vanished into the crowd.

He watched the plankway they'd walked, the air there still feeling... bent. Like reality itself was taking a second to smooth its clothes. The dockworker who'd limped past them kept rolling his shoulder like he couldn't believe it had stopped hurting.

Jean didn't need another test.

He'd felt enough.

Power like that didn't belong loose on a pier. And whatever was moving in the deep didn't belong to anything that lived up here.

So he did the only thing a scholar does when fear and curiosity are both shouting in his ear.

He investigated.

He pulled his hood up and stepped fully into Saltwake.

People turned to look—not in suspicion, but in recognition. Argonians here knew Academy work when they saw it: the straightness of his spine, the faint glimmer of ward-ink at his wrists, the sea-blue braid threaded through his sash.

In Saltwake, that meant three things at once:

He was theirs.

He was dangerous.

He was useful.

No one scattered. If anything, shoulders unclenched. Even the roughest net-menders straightened like someone had just thrown them a rope.

He started where any sensible water-mage would: at the pier that kept sending back ruined nets.

An old net-mender crouched there, crest ridges gone pale at the edges, claws working fast. Rope slid through her hands in a blur, knots forming with the kind of muscle memory you only get from a lifetime of telling the sea “no” and sometimes winning.

“Mother Sahl,” Jean greeted, respectful.

She glanced up. Her eyes narrowed, then softened. “Jean. Scholar-son. Back from the sky-schools already?”

“Visiting,” he said. “I heard about the nets.”

Her mouth twisted. “You heard right.”

He crouched beside her, mask of calm firmly in place. “Walk me through it. From the first time.”

She spat into the water.

“Week and a half ago. Maybe two. After that big... whatever it was.” She flicked her chin toward the open bay. “Nets start coming up wrong. Not ripped. *Shredded*. Like a hundred tiny claws combed through them at once.”

Jean leaned closer. “Pattern? Time? Depth?”

“Always deep water. Always on calm days.” She jerked her head toward the mouth of the bay. “Always near the old pilings.”

“Old pilings...” he echoed.

“Where the water goes black quicker than it should,” she said.

His throat tightened, but he kept his voice level. “Anyone see anything?”

“Some say shadow.” Her claws tugged a knot tight. “Some say green fog under the surface. Most say nothing, because saying nothing feels safer than saying something you can’t prove.”

He let that hang between them a moment.

Then asked the question he didn’t want to ask.

“Do the elders think it’s a creature?”

Sahl’s crest flared. “Not a creature,” she hissed, like the word offended her. “No teeth marks. No bite. This isn’t hunger. This is *intention*.”

Jean held her gaze. “You think it’s sentient.”

She shrugged, but it wasn’t casual. It was a resignation. “The sea has old minds, boy. Older than our clans. We only ever hoped they were sleeping.”

He thanked her, rose, and moved on.

The second pier held three fisher brothers arguing with a harbor clerk. Jean’s shadow fell across them and the argument died instantly.

“Scholar-Jean,” the clerk said, bowing his head.

“Tell me what you know,” Jean said, neutral tone, no wasted ceremony.

One brother scratched his jaw ridge. “Nothing useful. We cast, we haul, we come back empty with nets ruined. We’ve tried iron weights, rune-threads, prayer salt. Doesn’t matter.”

“Have you tried singing to it?” Jean asked without irony.

The brothers blinked.

Then the eldest nodded slowly. “Once. Old tide hymn. Not sure why.”

“And?”

“It stopped shredding for a whole day,” he said. “Next morning it came back worse. Like it had been offended.”

Jean felt cold go through his spine.

“Offended,” he echoed softly.

The youngest brother muttered, “It’s like the water’s rejecting us. Like something down there doesn’t want *nets* touching it anymore.”

Jean glanced toward the black-water pilings again.

“Anything else strange?” he asked.

The middle brother hesitated. “There *was* a human with a farmer woman earlier. Green hair. They were looking around like tourists. Not from Saltwake.”

Jean’s stomach tightened, but he kept his face still.

“What did the human look like?”

“Plain,” the brother said. “Too plain. Like he belonged nowhere and everywhere.”

The youngest snorted. “But the air around him felt... heavy.”

The eldest elbowed him. “Don’t talk nonsense to a scholar.”

Jean didn’t correct them. He thanked them and moved on.

He found Captain Rho near the bell tower.

Rho was Argonian and built like a tidewall, scarred and steady, the kind of man who’d carved order into Saltwake by stubborn repetition. When he saw Jean, some of the iron in his jaw relaxed.

“You’re here about the nets,” Rho said.

“Yes.”

Rho folded his arms. “Then you already know they’re wrong.”

“I want to know what *you* think,” Jean said.

Rho stared out at the bay like he’d been itching for a reason to punch it.

“I think the bay’s been haunted since before my grandfather’s grandfather,” he said. “I think we’ve been lucky that whatever lives under those old pilings was more tired than angry. And I think that Pulse woke something that didn’t want to wake up.”

Jean’s tail went still.

“You link it to the Pulse,” he said.

“Everyone does,” Rho replied. “They just don’t say it because fear spreads faster than fish.”

“Any disappearances?” Jean asked.

“Not yet.”

“*Yet*,” Jean echoed.

Rho’s eyes hardened. “We’re holding the line. People trust me. They trust you more.”

Jean felt the weight of that like a hand between his shoulder blades.

“I’ll do what I can,” he said.

“You already are,” Rho said. “You’re asking questions before swinging spells. That helps.”

By the time Jean had walked the length of the docks, the pattern had stopped pretending it wasn’t a pattern.

Nets shredded only in the deep black pockets near the old pilings.

No bite marks. No slashes. Just deliberate ruin.

Green fog, seen by the few who dared to say it out loud.

Old tide hymns calming it for a day—like something reacting to *memory*, not bait.

The Pulse as the moment everything changed.

And that plain human with the impossible aura walking these planks the same morning the bay started acting like it recognized something.

Jean stopped at the end of a quiet pier and looked down.

The surface of the water wobbled in innocent little ripples. Sunlight scattered in clean, bright lines.

It looked normal.

It did not feel normal.

Because now he understood the shape of the thing looming under all of this:

This wasn't just the sea getting angry at nets.

Something ancient was **awake**.

Something ancient was **aware**.

And it had just brushed against a signature it remembered.

His claws curled slowly at his sides.

He had to keep his mother safe.

He had to keep Saltwake from tearing itself apart with fear.

He had to keep the city from panicking its way into famine.

And he had to figure out what, exactly, that green-aura human was—before the wrong people decided to claim him.

Jean exhaled, long and slow.

"Alright," he murmured to the bay, like it was an old god and not just water. "I hear you. I'm listening."

The surface only shimmered.

Far below, something in the dark stirred like breath.

Jean turned away from the edge and headed back toward the alleys, already planning his next move—not as a hero, not as prey, but as a tired scholar who had just realized he was standing on the edge of something that could rewrite the world.

Chapter 5 — “A Scholar’s Three Moves”

Jean didn't chase the green-aura man like a fool.

He followed like a tide.

Quiet. Patient. Always there if you looked the right way, invisible if you didn't.

Saltwake made that easy. Crowds were constant, piers were layered, alleys curved like ribs through the dockside. Jean moved through it in the half-shadow behind net racks and sail stacks, letting the dock noise swallow his steps. Every time he got too close to the human's presence, the air felt thick, not hostile—just *full*, the way the sea feels full right before a storm you can't see yet.

The man didn't notice.

The woman—Alina—didn't either.

They stopped at stalls, asked simple questions, and ate like tourists who didn't mean to be tourists. The human kept looking at the water with that unfocused stare of someone trying to remember a song from childhood. He didn't touch anyone, didn't cast anything, didn't do anything a dock would call dangerous.

Yet things around him changed anyway.

A fisher girl with a bandaged palm brushed past him and winced—then blinked, shaking her hand as if the sting had vanished.

A tired old dockworker who always leaned on the same post straightened without realizing his back no longer ached.

A grieving woman arguing with a merchant suddenly stopped mid-sentence, her shoulders loosening as if a knot in her chest had been cut.

No chant.

No gesture.

No intent.

Just the *field* of him.

Jean watched all of it with a scholar's horror.

Because this wasn't a spell.

This was **nature**.

He waited until they turned into a quieter pier lane, then slipped away.

Move one complete: **observe without contact.**

Now he needed history.

The Tidekeeper lived where Saltwake went old.

Not in the bright docks, but beyond them, past the last salt-black warehouses, where the plank roads narrowed and the sea sound turned from commerce to breathing. A small shrine squatted there half-swallowed by rope ivy and wind-salt, its stones carved with spirals older than the piers.

Jean bowed before entering.

Inside, an elder Argonian sat cross-legged in a shallow pool that lapped at her waist. Her scales were matte with age, her crest ridges draped in shell-chains, her eyes pale as tide foam. The air around her smelled like brine that had never seen sunlight.

“Tidekeeper Naal,” Jean said.

Her eyes opened slowly. “Jean of the Luminarium Ward.”

He froze a fraction. “You know me.”

She clicked softly. “The water knows who listens to it.”

Jean swallowed. He couldn’t cast a seeking art to confirm his suspicions, and even if he could, he didn’t trust spells right now. So he did something older.

He *asked*.

“Something is moving in the deep pockets near the old pilings,” he said. “Not a beast. Not a current. A presence. Green... mistlike. Intentional.”

Naal’s claws stilled on the pool’s edge.

“How long since the nets began to shred?”

“Weeks. After the Great Pulse.”

Her eyelids lowered.

“Then it was not the nets that woke it. The nets only annoyed it.” She lifted her gaze to him. “The Pulse was a bell. It did what bells do.”

Jean’s tail went still. “You’ve heard of this presence before?”

Naal didn’t answer directly. That was an older language.

“What color is the aura in your docks?” she asked.

Jean hesitated. He hated saying it aloud.

“Green,” he admitted. “Two greens. Lime at the core. Dark at the edges.”

Naal inhaled slowly... and the pool rippled without wind.

“Long ago,” she said, voice low, “the sea learned the taste of a light it could not swallow. It has waited since.”

Jean’s throat tightened.

“Is it dangerous?”

Naal looked at him like he’d asked whether storms were dangerous.

“It is **awake**,” she said. “That is all I can say without lying.”

Jean forced himself to breathe evenly.

“There is a human in Saltwake,” he said. “Plain. Doesn’t cast. But the world bends around him. People heal near him. The water—” he swallowed, “—reacts to him.”

Naal watched him in silence for a long moment.

Then she said quietly, “If the water reacts to him, then your question is not about danger. It is about **purpose**. ”

Jean felt that land in his ribs.

“What should I do?”

Naal’s voice softened like a tide turning.

“Do not draw blades at a sunrise you don’t understand.”

She leaned forward. “And do not let the city’s fear find him before the water’s memory does.”

Jean bowed deeper.

Move two complete: **consult the oldest ear on the docks.**

Now he needed to warn the academy.

He didn’t send a raven.

Too obvious.

He didn’t cast a tracing whisper.

Wouldn’t form.

So Jean did what scholars did under pressure—he used **people**.

He walked to a neutral courier alcove beneath the pier-bell tower, where academy messengers rotated daily. A young human clerk looked up, surprised but respectful.

“Scholar Jean.”

Jean laid a folded slip of tide-paper on the counter. The ink was ordinary at first glance. But anyone trained in the Luminarium Ward would read the *pattern*, not the words.

The clerk didn’t even open it. Just nodded and sealed it into the outgoing stack.

Inside the letter, Jean had written:

To Senior Detectors / Coastal Council

Saltwake disturbance confirmed sentient-pattern.

Nets shredded only near old pilings / deep black pockets.

Green mist presence observed below the surface.

Epicenter signature **present in Saltwake** under plain human vessel.

Seeking-arts failing in ambient pressure; do not attempt public casting.

I will maintain eyes and report shifts.

—Jean

He watched the stack disappear into the courier chute.

Move three complete: **alert without igniting panic.**

By dusk, Jean was back in the pier shadows.

The green-aura man and the green-haired woman were still in Saltwake, drifting along the planks like they were learning the docks as a new script. The bay beneath them lay too smooth, like a mouth holding back words.

Jean didn't step out.

Not yet.

He waited in the half-dark, listening to gulls complain, to rope grind through pulleys, to the subtle way the water changed its breathing whenever the man wandered close to the edge.

The shape of the wall in front of him was clear now:

He couldn't reach for answers with magic — the pressure would strangle any spell he cast.

The city couldn't be told yet — panic would starve Saltwake faster than any storm. And the sea... the sea remembered something the world had tried very hard to bury.

So he did the only thing left.

He stayed close enough to intervene.

Far enough not to become a spark.

And he watched Saltwake the way tides watch a shoreline:

patient,

relentless,

waiting for the moment the deep finally decided to speak.

Chapter 6—“The Sigil That Sang” (Junction Event)

Jean was halfway through sealing the tide-paper when the world flinched.

It wasn't the polite tremor of dock planks settling. It wasn't a gull storm or a ship impact. This was deeper. **Stone-deep.** The bell tower groaned like something had pressed a thumb against the city's spine.

For a heartbeat Saltwake went silent.

Then the shock hit properly.

The docks lurched. Crates toppled. Nets swung off hooks. Somewhere a mast snapped with a whip-crack that made people scream before they understood why. The water bucked against the pilings as if it had been slapped from below. The pier-bells clanged by accident, and the sound thundered across the bay like an alarm nobody had ordered.

Jean grabbed the counter to steady himself.

The courier clerk went pale. “Scholar—?”

Jean didn’t answer. He was already feeling the air.

Mana surged so violently that it felt like the sky had inhaled too fast.

Not a Pulse that stretched across continents—this was **local**, raw, uncontrolled, and sudden.

Saltwake did what cities do when they don’t know what’s happening: it panicked.

People poured out of stalls. Fishers abandoned nets mid-mend. Argonian mothers scooped children onto shoulders and ran for higher planks. Humans yelled prayers, demi-humans yelled commands, and even the pier-warden’s voice was drowned out by the swarm of fear.

Jean’s scales prickled.

Not the deep.

Not the old pilings.

This came from inside the city.

He shoved the letter into the chute anyway, hands moving on instinct. The moment it vanished, he was already sprinting out of the alcove and into the chaos.

Because whatever that was, it was close.

And close meant **someone had done something they didn’t understand.**

Not far away, Arken was standing beside Alina in a quieter dock lane where market noise softened into tide-breath.

They had found a little archway just off the pier roads — nothing special, just a corner where fish smoke didn't sting the eyes and the sun cut through sail-shadows in warm strips. Alina had been talking about home wards the whole walk, not like a scholar, but like someone remembering safety.

"My dad used to draw these," she said, a small smile tugging at her mouth. "Not because we were rich or powerful. Just... because they made the house feel calm. Like the walls were hugging you back."

Arken listened the way he always listened when she spoke about her parents—carefully, like their names were glass.

She crouched and traced a simple warding sigil into the dust with a stick. Three lines. One curl. A closing mark like a knot tied shut.

"It's protection," she explained. "Nothing crazy. It's the idea of a door that remembers to stay closed when fear knocks."

Arken crouched beside her.

He didn't feel confused by the shape. He felt... *recognized by it*. Like his hand already knew where the lines wanted to go.

"Can I try?" he asked.

Alina blinked. "It's not a chant spell, Arken. I can't cast. I only remember the shapes."

He nodded. "Shapes are okay."

She handed him the stick.

Arken redrew the first line.

The moment the tip touched the ground, the dust lit faintly green.

Alina froze.

Arken froze too, more startled than she was. "Oh—I didn't—"

The second line flared brighter, the curl knitting itself into light the way ink soaks into paper. There was no chant. No breath held for timing. No pause to gather mana. The drawing simply **happened**, because his hand moved and reality agreed.

And then the sound came.

Soft at first. Not a voice. Not a bell. A **natural tone**, like wind slipping through leaves or water running across smooth stone. It wasn't loud, but it had weight. It made the air feel kinder.

Alina's eyes went wide in a way that wasn't scary.

"That's... that's the sound," she whispered, breath catching. "That sound. The one I told you about. The one that always made me feel safe."

Arken stared at the glowing lines like they were a campfire he'd accidentally made.

"It feels... nice," he said, almost embarrassed by how true it was. He looked at her.

"Thank you for showing me."

Alina smiled despite herself, warmth cracking through her shock.

"You're welcome," she said softly. "But—Arken, I don't think you drew it right."

He blinked. "I didn't?"

She leaned closer. "The third stroke should close **this** way, not that way. You mirrored it."

Arken looked down.

The sigil was beautiful.

And wrong.

He opened his mouth to fix it—

Then a group of dockworkers passed by laughing, and Alina tugged his sleeve gently.

"It's okay," she said quickly, not wanting attention. "We can redraw it later at home. Let's go."

Arken hesitated.

But he trusted her.

So he snapped the stick in half, brushed dust from his hands, and followed her back toward the pier lanes.

Behind them, the glowing sigil stayed on the ground like a quiet green lantern left lit.

For a minute it just hummed.

For a minute the tone was gentle enough to make stray cats curl up beside it without understanding why.

Then the hum began to sharpen.

The light thickened.

The lines tried to correct themselves and couldn't.

Magic hates a lock that's half-closed.

The sigil swelled like a breath held too long—

And **detonated**.

Not a fireball. Not shrapnel. A pure pressure bloom, green-white and silent for the first blink, then loud in the way earthquakes are loud. The ground bucked. Air punched outward. Planks rattled. The nearest pier posts cracked like old bone. A wave slapped up over the docks and drenched shouting fishers. It wasn't shrapnel or a fireball. It was a pure pressure bloom—a silent, green-white flash for a split second, then a sound like an earthquake. The ground bucked under the impact. Air punched violently outward, rattling planks and cracking the nearest pier posts like old bone. A sudden wave surged over the docks, soaking the startled, shouting fishers.

Saltwake screamed. Yoatha shook.

Arken and Alina spun at the sound.

They were far enough that no debris reached them, but close enough to feel the shockwave punch their ribs.

Alina clapped her hands over her mouth.

Arken's eyes went huge.

“What—what was that?” she gasped.

Arken stared at his own hands like they'd betrayed him.

“I... I don't know.”

Alina looked at him then, really looked—not accusing, that wasn’t her. But searching for a truth she didn’t have words for.

“We walked away and it...” Her voice broke. “Arken, is there something wrong with you?”

The question didn’t mean *evil*.

It meant *danger without intent*.

The way you ask someone who keeps getting hurt by their own body.

Arken swallowed hard.

He wanted to say “no.”

He wanted to say “yes.”

He wanted to say “I don’t know what I am.”

But he didn’t have those words yet.

So he whispered the only honest thing he had.

“I think... I’m doing things without meaning to.”

Alina’s throat worked.

She tore her eyes away from him to the chaos blooming down the pier lanes—people running, guards shouting, mothers crying, fishers dragging each other upright.

Then she turned back to him.

Her hands trembled.

But she reached out anyway.

She took his wrist like she’d done on the roof the first day, grounding him with touch.

“Okay,” she said softly, voice shaking but stubborn. “Then we figure it out. Together.”

Arken stared at her, something hot and painful blooming behind his eyes.

He nodded once.

Because he didn’t trust himself right now.

But he trusted her.

And behind them, Yoatha's docks were on the edge of breaking into full panic...while a running scholar named Jean cut through the chaos, closing the distance toward the epicenter he hadn't meant to find this soon.

Chapter 7 — “Aftermath in Green”

Jean reached the blast lane with the city still screaming behind him.

Saltwake was a living stampede now. Fishermen stumbling over ropes. Vendors dragging carts out of the road. The pier-warden barking orders that got swallowed by louder fear. The bell tower kept ringing on accident like the city had bitten its tongue and couldn't stop the bleeding noise.

Jean didn't let the panic catch him. He passed through it the way water passes through reeds — fast, quiet, and impossible to block.

The epicenter wasn't hard to find. Not with magic — seeking-arts still choked in the saturated air — but with senses that didn't need spells. The planks here were scorched in a circle the size of a small courtyard. Posts were split and leaning. The nearest nets had been blown sideways and tangled high on hooks where no wave should've reached.

And in the center of it all...

A faint green mark burned into the wood.

Jean crouched, ignoring the stinging heat that still bled from the boards. He brushed ash aside with the edge of his sleeve, careful, reverent in the way scholars get around runework.

It was a warding sigil.

Simple.

Apprentice-grade.

The kind first-years learned before lunch breaks.

Jean frowned and traced the shape in the air, rebuilding it mentally from the scorched ghost. Three lines, a curl, a closing knot—

Wrong.

The third stroke had been mirrored. A protection loop turned into a pressure latch. The sigil tried to seal itself in the opposite direction and tore its own spine.

A malformed ward. Yes.

But even malformed, this should have done **nothing** worse than a sharp crack of light and a bruised plank.

Jean's brow tightened harder.

Because the wood didn't lie.

This wasn't a crack.

This was a detonation.

He laid two fingers lightly over the burned groove. The residue humming there wasn't angry anymore — it was exhausted, the way air feels after lightning. There was still a faint tone clinging to it, the same natural sound the docks had been whispering about since the nets started shredding.

Jean's heart thudded once, heavy.

"Apprentice sigil... right shape class," he murmured under his breath. "Wrong closure... but still apprentice."

He stared at the scorch radius again.

Then he said the sentence that made his mouth go dry.

"Not possible."

A nearby Argonian guard staggered over, scales ash-smudged, crest ridges flared in stress.

"Scholar Jean!" the guard gasped. "What is it? Sea-curse? Sabotage?"

Jean didn't look up yet.

"Neither," he said quietly.

The guard blinked. "Then what—"

Jean finally lifted his head, eyes sharp.

"This ward is basic. Even if drawn

wrong, it shouldn't shake a street, let alone the docks."

"So how did it?"

Jean's throat worked.

He answered like a teacher who hated the lesson.

"Only one way."

He pointed at the burned lines.

"Mana was fused into it while it was being drawn. Not ambient drift. **Injected**. The sigil didn't fail on its own. It was *overfilled*."

The guard's eyes widened. "That much mana? From who?"

Jean almost laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was insane.

"Not a dock mage," he said. "Not a thief. Not even most senior scholars could do that without preparation and collapse."

He hesitated, then added the part that mattered.

"Even *I* struggle to fuse that kind of output into a live sigil."

The guard's mouth went slightly open.

Jean rose slowly, gaze sweeping the lane—not seeking with magic, just reading the world like a detective reads footprints.

No ritual stands.

No chalk circles.

No sacrifice stains.

No rune-threads anchoring a bomb ward.

This wasn't sabotage.

This was someone casually drawing a protection mark...with a flood behind their fingertips.

Jean felt cold crawl up his spine as memory snapped into place.

Plain human.

Green aura wide as a ship.

Miracle field leaking without intent.

The sea recognized him.

Jean exhaled through his nostrils like he was trying not to drown.

“Someone with endless mana walked this lane,” he said softly to himself.

The guard heard him anyway.

“You mean… a master?”

Jean swallowed.

“No,” he said, too quiet. “Something else.”

Behind them, the city’s panic swelled again as another pier-post collapsed from aftershock strain. People screamed. Children cried. The pier-warden was shouting for order and getting none.

The human and the green-haired farmer woman stood a short distance away, frozen in shock the way normal people freeze when the world they trust starts breaking rules. The woman’s face was pale with guilt and fear. The man was staring at his hands like he wanted to cut them off.

Jean didn’t need spells.

He didn’t need the council’s permission.

He didn’t even need the water’s whisper.

He knew.

The impossible mana had been fused into that apprentice ward by accident.

By **him**.

Jean’s claws curled at his sides.

Not in hatred.

In something worse—

responsibility.

Because if a gentle apprentice sigil could do *this* just by being touched by that aura... Then the world was standing next to a walking law of nature it didn't understand. And Saltwake was about to learn what happens when nature wakes up in a city built on fear.

Jean took one slow step forward.

He was approaching like a scholar who had just found the center of the storm... and realized the storm didn't know it was a storm yet.

Chapter 8 — “The Weight of Strength”

Jean stopped three paces short of them.

He didn't rush. Didn't raise a hand. Didn't let the chaos behind him leak into his voice. If he came in sharp, the situation would cut deeper. If he came in afraid, fear would multiply.

So he held still for one breath and let his mother's voice rise out of old memory.

Not a quote. Not a slogan. Just the shape of a lesson she'd carved into him the way tide carves stone:

When the sea gives you strength, it isn't yours alone. Strength is never *just* a gift. It is a duty disguised as power.

She had taught him that on days when he'd come home proud of a new spell, chest puffed high like a gull in the wind. She would smile and ask him who the spell could protect. Who it could hurt. What kind of person he wanted to be when the water listened to him.

Jean had grown up less afraid of being strong than of being careless with it.

And right now, carelessness was standing in front of him with a human face and a sky-wide aura — scared, confused, and *not meaning to hurt anyone*.

He stepped forward.

Alina flinched as if she sensed the shift. Her hands were still on Arken's wrist, anchoring him the way she always did when the world went wrong.

Jean didn't look at Arken first.

He looked at **her**.

Not because she was weaker. Because she was the bridge.

"Miss," he said in calm Common, voice low enough not to feed the crowd. "Step with me. Now."

Alina blinked. "What?"

Jean moved closer—not to Arken, but to her side. His posture was gentle but immovable, the way currents are gentle right before they drag you under.

"Please," he repeated. "Two steps. I need to speak to you away from him."

Arken lifted his head sharply at the word.

Alina turned half-protective, half-confused. "Why? We didn't—"

Jean didn't let the sentence finish.

He kept his voice steady. "You didn't do anything wrong. But right now he is... unstable. I need you safe so I can explain."

That did it.

Alina's face tightened with fear she didn't want to show. She hesitated — because leaving Arken felt like betrayal — then swallowed and nodded once.

"Arken," she said softly, turning to him. "I'll be right here."

Arken's eyes were wide, raw. "Alina—"

"I'm not leaving," she promised. "Just... one second."

Jean guided her two steps sideways, placing his own body between her and Arken without making it theatrical.

Arken stiffened at that, like the world had just called him a threat out loud.

Jean met his eyes for the first time.

And saw what he expected.

Not malice. Not arrogance.

A man drowning in a power he doesn't understand.

Jean inhaled slowly.

"Listen to me," he said, still calm. "Both of you."

Saltwake screamed in the distance, but on this pier lane his voice made a pocket of quiet.

"That blast was from a warding sigil," Jean said. "A protection mark. Apprentice-level. The kind children draw on doors to feel brave."

Alina's breath hitched. "I showed him a word. I didn't think—"

"I know," Jean said gently, cutting her guilt off before it could become a knife. "And it's not your fault."

He glanced at the scorched planks behind them.

"The sigil was drawn incorrectly. Mirrored closure." He looked back at Arken. "That mistake would normally cause a harmless pop. A cracked board at most."

Arken swallowed. "Then why did it—"

"Because it was filled," Jean said simply. "Not by intent—by **presence**."

Arken blinked like the word didn't compute.

Jean kept going, quick but careful, like defusing a tense rune-thread.

"When a sigil is drawn, it takes mana according to its design. Apprentice sigils are shallow cups. They can't hold storms. I even have to prepare if I want to fuse real output into a live ward."

He let that land, then lowered his voice a touch.

"You didn't prepare. You didn't chant. You didn't mean to."

Arken's jaw tightened. "I don't know how I did it."

"I believe you."

That shocked Arken more than the accusation would have.

Jean didn't soften too much — compassion without clarity was just a different kind of cruelty.

"You are carrying an amount of mana the city has never seen shaped in one body." His eyes flicked to the faint green haze around Arken. "It leaks from you naturally. It saturates the air. It slips into anything you touch... including dust drawings."

Alina's hands trembled. "So he's dangerous?"

Jean shook his head once. "Not dangerous because he wants harm. Dangerous because the world responds to him **even when he isn't trying.**"

Arken flinched like he'd been slapped.

Jean's voice stayed even. "Right now, seeking-arts can't even form in your vicinity. Strong mages across continents panicked because of a Pulse you didn't know you cast. An apprentice ward detonated because your mana treated it like a deep rune."

Arken stared at his own palms again, horror growing.

He looked at Alina, then back to Arken.

"If you have this strength," Jean said quietly, "you have a responsibility to learn what it does. Not because the world owns you. Not because you owe strangers worship. But because power without understanding turns accidents into funerals."

Arken's throat worked.

"How?" he asked. "I don't even know what I am."

Jean nodded once, like a mentor accepting a student's first honest admission.

"Then we start simple," he said. "You don't need chancraft. You need **control.** You'll learn how to hold your mana in, shape it, decide where it goes... and where it doesn't."

Arken's eyes flicked to Alina.

She was still scared. Still shaking.

But she didn't step back.

She stepped closer to him instead, as if choosing him in front of a storm.

Jean noticed.

Good. He needed that anchor to stay.

“I won’t let you be hunted for being what you are,” Jean said, voice low. “But I also won’t let you stay ignorant and accidentally tear this city apart.”

Arken swallowed.

Then nodded once.

Not confident. Not proud.

Just... willing.

“Okay,” he said. “Teach me.”

Jean felt something tight in his chest ease — not relief, exactly. More like the first plank laid across a ravine.

“Good,” he replied. “First rule: you don’t draw another sigil until you can feel the difference between a cup and an ocean.”

Arken gave a tiny, shaky exhale that might’ve been a laugh if fear wasn’t sitting on it.

Jean glanced past them at the panicking docks.

“We need to move,” he said. “People are afraid, and fear is loud. Let’s get you somewhere quiet before the wrong ears decide what you are for you.”

Alina nodded quickly. “Bring him to my farm. Hearthweave. It’s hidden.”

Jean paused. Considered. Then agreed.

“Good place to start.”

He looked at Arken one more time, not as a judge now, but as someone who had accepted a duty.

“Walk close,” Jean said. “And try not to touch anything you don’t mean to change.”

Arken nodded again, jaw clenched like someone stepping into the first day of a war he didn't choose.

Jean started to turn—

Then stopped.

He glanced at Alina, seeing the tremor in her hands, the way she kept forcing herself to stand between Arken and the world without truly understanding *what* she was standing beside.

“Before we go,” Jean said quietly, “you need to see what you can’t.”

Alina blinked. “What do you mean?”

Jean’s jaw tightened. Seeking-arts were failing everywhere; the air was too saturated to let any “looking-for” spell hold its shape. But he didn’t need a long cast. He only needed a **flicker**—a window.

He lifted one hand and whispered a tight, disciplined activation under his breath. The spell fought him immediately, stalling like it was trying to inhale through water. His scales pricked with strain.

For a heartbeat nothing happened.

Then—barely—it **formed**.

A thin shimmer snapped over his eyes. The world sharpened into mana-contrast for a breath, maybe two.

“Look,” he said, voice strained. “Now.”

Alina followed his gaze without understanding why—And her body went still.

To her sight, the sky above Arken wasn’t empty anymore.

A **beam** of green rose from him like a pillar reaching the heavens, so vast it made the docks feel small, so bright it turned the air itself into layered color. Mana poured out of Arken at an alarming, endless rate—lime-green at the core, deeper green fading outward, expanding and breathing like a living storm that didn’t know it was a storm.

Alina’s mouth parted soundlessly.

The spell on Jean's eyes snapped apart the next instant, collapsing again under the pressure. But it didn't matter.

She had seen enough.

She lifted her head slowly, eyes wet, skin prickling with the same instinctive awe the oldest scholars carried when they spoke of miracles.

It wasn't scary now.

It was **understanding**—raw and trembling.

She looked at Arken as if she'd been standing beside a cliff her whole life and only just realized how deep it went.

And in that green-lit heartbeat, Alina felt it:

the presence of a *God*.

Her fingers tightened around Arken's wrist—not to restrain him.

To hold on.

Jean lowered his hand, the strain fading from his face.

"Now you know what I mean," he said softly.

Alina didn't speak.

She just nodded once, the way someone nods when their world has changed shape.

Arken stared between them, confused and frightened by what he couldn't see, by what he *was*.

Jean steadied his voice.

"We move," he said. "Quietly. Together."

And this time, when they turned away from Saltwake's panicking piers, Alina didn't feel like she was walking beside a strange man anymore.

She felt like she was walking beside a force of the world—

one she loved, one she feared,
and one she had chosen anyway.

Chapter 10 — “Audience with Blood and Crown”

They didn’t separate in anger.

That mattered to Jean.

After the docks settled into something that was more chaos than order but less than stampede, he walked Arken and Alina to the edge of Saltwake’s main pier road, where the city climbed back up toward Hearthweave.

“Where is your farm?” Jean asked.

Alina swallowed and described the route — out of the dock quarter, past the lower markets, along the old stone road veining into the hills. Hearthweave Borough. Third split after the well shrine. House with a crooked ash tree and three fence posts leaning the wrong way.

Jean memorized it.

“I’ll meet you there,” he said.

Arken frowned. “You’re not coming with us?”

“Not yet,” Jean replied. “I need to move my mother somewhere safer. And I need to speak to the King.”

Alina stiffened. “The King? Why?”

“Because this isn’t just a dock accident anymore,” Jean said. “It’s a city issue. A continent issue. If someone with your power exists, and the wrong ears find out first, you won’t get a mentor.” His gaze flicked to Arken. “You’ll get chains.”

Arken looked away.

Jean softened his tone a fraction. “I’m not handing you over. I’m asking permission to protect you properly.”

He bowed his head to both of them, a gesture equal parts respect and promise.

“Go home,” he said. “Stay quiet. Don’t draw anything. I’ll come to Hearthweave as soon as I can... and I won’t be alone.”

Then he turned, cloak snapping in the dock wind, and ran.

Jean’s mother opened the door before he could knock.

She must have felt the second shock from Saltwake all the way to her bones; her crest ridges were rigid, her eyes wide with the brittle look of someone braced for bad news.

“Jean,” she breathed.

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him, cutting off the outside noise. The house smelled like herbs and sea-salt and the faint ash of old incense. Home.

“What happened?” she demanded. “The bells, the shaking—was it the same as before?”

Jean didn’t waste time with half-truths. She’d see through them anyway.

“It’s connected,” he said. “But not the same. The great Pulse was... global. Like the world being pressed.” He met her eyes. “This was local. A spark. From a boy.”

“A boy?” Her jaw tensed. “What boy?”

Jean exhaled slowly.

“A human,” he said. “Plain in the eyes. Not plain in anything else. His mana is... mom, it’s beyond anything the academy has charted. He doesn’t chant. He doesn’t prepare. It pours out of him like a breath.”

She stared at him like he’d said the sea had caught fire.

“Is he doing it on purpose?” she asked.

“No,” Jean said at once. “That’s the problem. He’s stumbling into it. He drew an apprentice ward—badly. Mirrored closure. It should have popped, maybe scorched a board.” He hesitated. “Instead, it shook Saltwake.”

His mother’s claws curled against the table.

“Carelessness,” she hissed.

“Power without understanding,” Jean agreed quietly. “The thing you always warned me about.”

She looked at him sharply, catching the angle.

“And what are you thinking of doing, my son?” she asked.

“Taking responsibility,” he said simply. “If he has that strength and no control, we’re all standing in shallow water waiting for a wave. I can’t ignore it.”

The fear in her face didn’t soften. It sharpened.

“You’re not his keeper,” she said. “The academy should—”

“The academy will panic,” Jean cut in, more blunt than usual. “They will want to classify, dissect, weaponize, or bury. And the demons across the sea will sniff out the fear like sharks.”

He shook his head.

“I want to get ahead of that. Ask the King to let me guide him. And put him under someone who can teach restraint, not exploitation.”

His mother stared at him for a long, long moment.

Then she laughed once. No humor. Just disbelief aimed at fate.

“You find the center of the storm,” she said softly, “and your first thought is how to calm it instead of how to run.”

Jean looked away, feeling strangely young again.

“You’re the one who taught me that strength is a duty,” he muttered. “I’m just... obeying.”

Her expression cracked, some of the fear folding into pride even if she didn’t want it to.

“Idiot child,” she whispered, stepping forward to touch his face. “Bold, stubborn idiot child.”

He leaned into the touch for one breath.

Then pulled back.

“I’m moving you,” he said. “Closer to the palace. Noble quarter. Their wards are strongest there. I already planned to ask the Crown for housing while this... settles.”

Her eyes widened. “Jean, I won’t be a burden to—”

“You’ll be alive,” he said. “The thing under Saltwake woke when his mana hit the sea. If anything else happens, I want you behind walls and professional shields, not praying my wards hold from a dock shack.”

She went quiet at that. His wards had always been good. But she knew the difference between “good” and “good enough against something the sea itself respects.”

Finally, she nodded.

“You’ll visit?” she asked, softer now.

“As often as the world lets me,” he promised.

He hugged her—tight, because he understood now better than ever how fragile “next time” really was.

Then he left, carrying her worries with his own, up toward the heart of Yoatha.

The King’s Palace rose from the Noble Quarter like a carved wave frozen mid-crash.

White stone. Green glass. Banner-crests catching sunlight in sheets. It wasn’t the biggest building in the city, but it was the most deliberate — every angle chosen, every arch reinforced with subtle wards. Beauty was power here, and the palace was both a promise and a warning: *We can afford this. Don’t test why.*

Jean passed through three rings of guard sigils and steel before he was admitted to the inner hall.

The throne chamber wasn’t cavernous. It was intimate by design. The kind of room where rulers could see the fear or lies in a petitioner’s eyes without squinting. Sunlight poured through high windows shaped like stylized runes, painting the floor in green-white patterns.

King **Aurelian Vaust** sat the throne like someone who understood exactly how much weight a crown added to a spine. Tall, dark-haired, features sharp enough that bards liked to call him “sword-faced” behind his back — beautiful in that dangerous,

clear-boned way that made courtiers nervous. His eyes were a deep, thoughtful hazel that missed very little.

Beside him, Queen **Seraphine Vaust** was the softer line and the sharper mind. Hair like silvered ash falling in controlled waves, eyes a luminous green that echoed the city's wards, lips often curved in something almost like amusement but never quite losing calculation. She had the kind of beauty that made people underestimate how lethal her intellect was.

In Yoathallis, beauty was a language of power.

They both spoke it fluently.

They'd also both fainted in private the day the first great Pulse ripped through the world.

Jean knelt.

"Rise, Jean of Saltwake," Aurelian said. His voice was smooth, carrying more steel than volume.

Jean stood, keeping his gaze respectfully lowered but not weak. "Your Majesties. I bring news of the disturbance at the docks... and of its cause."

The Queen's fingers tapped once on the arm of her seat.

"We've heard rumors of an... explosion," Seraphine said. "We've also heard whispers that it felt nothing like stored powder or wild ritual. Enlighten us."

Jean chose his words as if each one were a sigil stroke.

"It was a ward," he said. "A basic protection sigil. Apprentice-level. Drawn incorrectly on a dock lane."

"And this small ward shook Saltwake?" the King asked, one brow lifting. "Forgive me if I consider that... unlikely."

"On its own, it would be impossible," Jean agreed. "But it wasn't alone. It was filled by a caster with infinite output — accidentally turned into a mana vessel it was never designed to be."

The room chilled.

Seraphine leaned forward slightly. The sunlight caught the faint arcane threads woven into her sleeves.

“Explain,” she said.

Jean did.

He told them about the plain human with the plain face and the not-plain aura. About the global Pulse. About Saltwake’s waking sea. About the apprentice sigil glowing and singing with a natural tone before detonating like a pressure-bomb. About the way seeking-arts broke apart in his presence, like the air refused to let them take shape.

He left nothing important out.

He also didn’t add speculation he couldn’t prove. Not yet.

When he finished, the hall felt smaller.

King Aurelian exhaled slowly through his nose, gaze distant for a heartbeat.

“When the Pulse struck,” he said, “I felt the world lean. My guard dropped like wheat in a storm. I remember... green.” His jaw tightened. “And then nothing.”

Seraphine’s voice went quieter.

“We woke on the floor,” she said. “Our strongest wards intact. Our healers babbling about gravity that had no source.” Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “You’re telling me that signature is now walking my docks in human skin.”

Jean held her gaze. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Is he hostile?” Aurelian asked.

“No,” Jean said at once. “Not deliberately. He is lost. Confused. He does not understand what he is. He reacted like a boy who broke a plate when that sigil blew.”

“How old?” Seraphine asked.

Jean thought of Arken’s face, the way years sat in his eyes but not in his features.

“Twenty to twenty-five summers, I’d guess,” he said. “Old enough to know right from wrong. Young enough to still be shaped by whoever reaches him first.”

Aurelian and Seraphine shared a look — that silent royal conversation marriages learn over years.

“The demons will smell this,” Seraphine said at last. “If word spreads that a walking mana font exists in Yoatha, every nefarious house in Red will send their best liars wearing their best smiles.”

“And certain human factions closer to home would not be far behind,” Aurelian added dryly. “Some in this city would try to make him a banner. Others, a corpse.”

He shifted his attention back to Jean.

“What do you propose?”

Jean squared his shoulders. This was the part that mattered.

“Permission, first,” he said. “To act *with* the Crown, not around it. I want to guide him. Teach him what little I can about control. To keep him from panicking, or from being taken, or from turning into a myth the mob decides to fear.”

Seraphine tilted her head. “You think he will trust you?”

“He trusted me enough to listen on the docks,” Jean said. “He accepted that he was dangerous before I finished the sentence. That humility is rare.”

The King’s mouth twitched, not quite a smile.

“And?” he asked. “Guidance from one S-tier water scholar is not enough for a phenomenon like this.”

Jean nodded.

“I agree,” he said. “I can teach him about responsibility. About not touching everything he passes. About how normal casters break when they try to match his output.”

He swallowed once.

“But for raw magic — for restraining a storm this size — we need someone greater. The continent’s most powerful wizard, if you can spare them.”

The request hung there like a thrown blade.

Seraphine’s eyes flashed with something almost like amusement.

“Ambitious,” she murmured.

Aurelian leaned back in his throne, fingers drumming once.

“You realize,” the King said, “that by standing here, asking this, you are marking yourself as his first defender. If this boy becomes catastrophe, some will blame you.”

Jean thought of his mother. Thought of her scales going pale when he spoke of the green mist. Thought of the sea under Saltwake, circling like a thinking thing.

“That’s already true,” he said. “I’ve met him. I’ve spoken to him. If I walk away now and he destroys something, I will blame me, even if no one else does.”

Silence stretched.

Then Seraphine smiled, small and sharp.

“I like him,” she said to Aurelian. “He thinks like a ruler and a fool at the same time.”

“The best kind of loyal idiot,” Aurelian agreed mildly.

He straightened.

“Very well, Jean of Saltwake. Your motion is granted. You are authorized to guide this boy — discreetly. You will report directly to us and to the High Magus.”

Jean blinked. “High Magus?”

Footsteps sounded in the side hall, soft but certain.

A figure emerged from a rune-lined archway — a tall elf with dusk-gold skin and long white hair braided back with threads of faintly glowing crystal. Age sat lightly on their face, but their eyes carried the weight of centuries of study. Robes layered in green and deep blue moved around them like slow water.

“High Magus **Elarion Saevin**,” Seraphine said. “Archwizard of Yoathallis. Verdant Archives’ most stubborn tenant. And, if gossip can be trusted, the most powerful wizard this continent produces once a generation.”

Elarion inclined their head to Jean, gaze measuring but not cruel.

“So,” Elarion said. “You’ve found the crack in the sky wearing boots.”

Jean managed not to choke. “Something like that,” he said.

Aurelian's tone turned formal again.

"Elarion will instruct him in restraint," the King said. "You will guide him in responsibility, context, and... human things." His mouth quirked faintly. "And both of you will keep him out of demon hands."

Seraphine's eyes went cool.

"In return," she added, "we will do our part. We will **cover** this. Officially, the docks suffered a mundane gas pocket explosion. Any mention of glowing sigils and world-bending mana will be quietly rewritten as panic. Rumors will be traced and smoothed. Anyone who gets too loud will find their attention... redirected."

Jean felt tension he hadn't realized he was holding leak out of his shoulders.

"Thank you," he said. "If this stays quiet long enough for us to teach him, we may avoid a war."

"Or start a different kind of one," Elarion said mildly. "But better a war of ideas than a war of fire."

Aurelian nodded once. "Go, then. Get your mother moved. Get to Hearthweave. And bring this boy to heel gently, Jean. He is not a weapon yet. Do not make him one."

Jean bowed low.

"I won't," he said.

As he turned to leave, Seraphine's voice followed him, softer but edged with curiosity.

"Jean," she said. "One more thing. This boy... Arken, was it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Does he know," she asked, "that he feels like the light from the old stories?"

Jean paused.

Remembered the way Arken had stared at his own hands in horror, the way he'd said *I don't even know what I am.*

"No," Jean said quietly. "And I think that's the only reason we have a chance."

He left the palace with a royal writ in his pocket, a High Magus at his side, and his mother's words about responsibility still ringing in his head.

Next stop: Hearthweave.

Next task: teach a walking god how not to break the world by accident.

Chapter 9 — “Relocation and Old Embers”

Moving Jean’s mother was supposed to be simple.

It wasn’t.

High Magus Elarion arrived to escort her personally, because that’s what you do when you’re the continent’s top wizard and the King quietly tells you a coastal scholar’s mother is now a priority asset. He showed up in Hearthweave like a man stepping into a play he’d already memorized — calm, composed, and with that faint look in his eyes like the world was a puzzle he was actively enjoying.

Jean’s mother, however, looked at Elarion the way the tide looks at the moon.

And Elarion looked back like he hadn’t missed a beat in eight years.

“Oh,” she said softly, crest ridges lifting in surprise. “You’re the one they sent.”

Elarion’s smile sharpened at the edges. “Of course it was me.”

Jean froze mid-step.

“No,” he muttered under his breath. “No, no, no. Please don’t do this right now.”

His mother stepped closer, hands on hips in that very specific Argonian way that meant *you will explain yourself later; handsome liar.*

“You still braid your hair the same,” she said.

“Habit is a comfort,” Elarion replied smoothly. His gaze dipped to her ridges. “So is returning to old... coastlines.”

Jean made a noise that was half cough, half gag.

“Alright, we’re leaving,” he said immediately, grabbing a satchel like it was a lifeboat. “Everyone’s packed. Great. Fantastic. Love the... reunion. I’m going to be over there. Far away. Very far.”

His mother didn't even look at him.

Elarion did, and the Magus's eyes glittered with wicked amusement. "You always were an impatient hatchling."

Jean recoiled like he'd been slapped. "Please don't call me that in front of— you know what? Don't call me that at all."

His mother laughed — an actual laugh — the first one she'd had since the Great Pulse. That alone made the whole humiliating scene worth it.

Still, Jean practically *teleported* himself out the door to avoid further emotional scarring.

Behind him, Elarion and his mother kept speaking in low tones, too familiar, too warm, the air between them thick with history that Jean absolutely did not want to picture.

He heard his mother say, "It's been a long time."

And Elarion respond, "Not long enough to forget."

Jean quickened his pace. "Nope. Nope. I'm a scholar, not a therapist. I'm leaving. I'm leaving aggressively."

When Elarion finally stepped out with her, Jean was already three streets ahead pretending he didn't exist.

As they walked toward the Noble Quarter, Jean couldn't help noticing Elarion's gait.

The High Magus didn't *walk* the way normal people walked. He moved like someone who considered gravity *optional*. Not rude. Not cruel. Just utterly sure of every step. His posture was straight in a way that said backbone wasn't something he had — it was something he *was*. He looked like a man with a plan already unfolding inside his skull, and everyone else was just catching up.

And those eyes...

Jean had seen warlords with calmer gazes.

Elarion's eyes were bright and hungry — not with malice, but with a dangerous kind of fascination. Like a mad alchemist who'd just watched a new law of nature crack open in front of him and was struggling not to grin.

Jean swallowed.

“So you’re eager to meet him,” Jean said.

Elarion didn’t deny it. “Eager? Yes.”

“You’re not worried?”

“Oh, I’m worried,” Elarion said lightly. “Worry and excitement can live in the same chest. That’s how discovery works.”

Jean stared at him sideways. “You sound thrilled.”

Elarion’s smile went lopsided. “If a star falls into your lap, do you yawn?”

Jean groaned. “Please don’t call him a star to his face.”

“I will call him whatever fits once I see him.”

That confidence was... unsettling.

Also, weirdly reassuring.

Chapter 10 — “Anchor, Storm, and the Mad Magus”

While Jean was busy surviving his own family trauma, Arken and Alina waited near Hearthweave’s fence line, tucked away from the city noise.

The docks had calmed, but the aftertaste of panic still clung to the air like smoke. Arken sat on a low stump, elbows on knees, staring at the dirt as if it might answer his questions.

Alina paced once, twice, then stopped beside him.

Arken looked up. “Alina.”

“Mm?”

“Why do you trust me so much?”

She blinked, caught off guard. “What?”

“You don’t know me,” he said quietly. “I appeared on your roof. I can barely speak. I make drawings that explode. You keep choosing me anyway.” His throat worked. “Why?”

Alina hesitated.

Then, like always, she didn’t dodge the truth.

“You feel like my father’s wards,” she said softly. “The safe kind. The ones that told me I could sleep. When you were on my roof... I felt that same sound, the same calm. Like the walls were hugging me again.”

Arken stared at her, the words landing deeper than she probably intended.

“But is that the only reason?” he asked.

Alina didn’t answer right away.

Arken pressed, not harshly, just honestly. “You’re risking your whole life for me. For a feeling.”

She was quiet for a long beat.

Then she nodded once, small and stubborn.

“Yeah.”

She tilted her head, meeting his eyes. “Is that so bad?”

Arken didn’t know what to say.

Because something inside him cracked open at the simplicity of it.

In his old life, he’d been cautious to the point of paralysis — always waiting for certainty, always waiting for the “right time,” always thinking tomorrow was guaranteed. He’d loved people, but he’d loved them *carefully*. Like affection needed a safety net.

Alina loved like the tide loved shorelines.

Spontaneous. Defiant. Real.

Arken swallowed.

"I wish I made decisions like that," he admitted. "Back then."

She studied him gently. "Maybe you can now."

Before he could answer, footsteps crunched across the dirt path.

Jean appeared first, looking like he hadn't slept in a century and had survived something far worse than a dock explosion.

Behind him walked Elarion Saevin.

The moment the High Magus stepped into the yard, the air changed.

Not because he cast anything. He didn't need to. He carried the kind of presence that made even silence stand straighter. His robes shifted like slow water, his hair catching the light in pale braids, his gaze already locked on Arken the way hunters lock on rare prey.

Except Elarion wasn't hunting to kill.

He was hunting to **understand**.

Jean cleared his throat. "Arken. Alina. This is High Magus Elarion Saevin."

Elarion gave a shallow bow that somehow looked like a compliment and an inspection at the same time. "A pleasure."

Arken stood awkwardly. "Hi."

Elarion's smile sharpened in pure amusement. "You have no idea what you are, do you?"

Arken tensed. "Not really."

"Oh good." Elarion's eyes lit brighter. "That makes this more interesting."

Jean shot him a look. "Magus."

Elarion lifted a hand like *fine, fine*, then glanced around the farm.

“I’ve been feeling your pressure for weeks,” he said to Arken bluntly. “Possibly longer. Every mage on this continent who wasn’t stone-deaf has felt it too. The difference is that most of them are pretending they didn’t.”

Arken blinked. “People can feel it?”

“Anyone with mana senses saturation,” Elarion said. “They might not *understand* it, but they feel the weight of it in the air. And that means this farm is not safe for you.” He sighed like a man discussing weather. “We need distance. A place that can absorb collateral without collapsing civilization.”

Jean folded his arms. “Where?”

Elarion didn’t hesitate. “Zeno. The elf continent.”

Alina stiffened. “The forests?”

“Their restoration arts are unmatched,” Elarion said. “If something goes wrong, they can mend trees, rebuild dwellings, and calm ecosystems almost instantly. They live in structures grown from living wood. If Arken’s power erupts again, the damage won’t be permanent.” He glanced at Jean. “But we need political permission. Not every elf elder will welcome a walking catastrophe on their branches.”

Jean nodded slowly. “We’ll speak to them discreetly.”

Elarion’s gaze slid back to Arken — delighted, invasive, *thrilled*.

“Now,” he said, stepping closer. “Give me your hand.”

Arken blinked. “Feel my hand?”

“No,” Elarion said like Arken was adorable. “Your mana pool.”

“Feel?”

“My specialty,” the Magus replied, already reaching.

Jean opened his mouth to warn him—

Too late.

Arken extended his hand.

Elarion placed two fingers against Arken’s wrist.

For three seconds, Elarion's expression was pure focus.

For one second after that, it was pure **shock**.

Then his eyes rolled slightly upward and he dropped like a marionette with its strings cut.

Alina gasped. Arken lurched forward. "What did I do?!"

"He's breathing," Jean snapped, already kneeling to check the Magus's pulse. "Just... overloaded."

Arken stared, horrified. "I didn't want to hurt him."

"You didn't." Jean looked up at him, steady and firm. "Your mana poured into him the instant he touched you. It was like trying to drink the ocean through a straw."

Alina crouched beside them, trembling. "Is he going to be okay?"

Jean glanced at Elarion's face.

The bruises of long travel, the fatigue lines under his eyes, even old scar tissue along his shoulder ridge — all of it was fading. The Magus's body was *healing* just from being close to Arken, even unconscious.

"He'll be more than okay," Jean said quietly. "That's part of the problem."

Arken looked between them, guilt and fear twisting together. "What problem?"

Jean took a slow breath.

"It's your aura," he said. "You're constantly emitting raw life-mana. Anyone sick, injured, or even damaged inside... gets repaired just by being near you. You can't turn it off yet. You don't even notice it happening."

Arken's mouth parted.

"So I'm... healing people without wanting to?"

"Yes."

"And blowing things up without wanting to?"

"Also yes."

Arken dragged a hand through his hair, looking like he might collapse next.

Jean gripped his shoulder.

“Hey.” Calm. Mentor voice. “This is why we’re moving. This is why we’re teaching you. You’re not evil. You’re not broken. You’re just *uninstructed*.”

Elarion groaned faintly and blinked awake, dazed.

He sat up slowly, then stared at Arken with a wild, breathless grin that looked almost feral.

“...Fascinating,” he whispered.

Jean sighed. “Welcome back.”

Elarion didn’t even hear him.

He looked at Arken like a man who’d just discovered a new element that could rewrite physics.

“Alright,” Elarion breathed, still half-stunned. “Yes. Elf continent. Immediately.”

Jean stood, helping the Magus fully upright. Then he looked at Arken and Alina.

“We leave quietly,” Jean said. “No crowds. No more drawings. On the road I’ll explain everything I know about your aura and how we start containing it.”

Arken nodded shakily.

Alina slid her hand into his like it belonged there.

And together — scholar, farmer, storm, and mad Magus — they stepped onto the path toward Zeno, carrying a secret big enough to fracture continents... and a hope fragile enough to fit in one human hand if they didn’t crush it first.

Chapter 11 — “First Lesson, First Flood”

They left Yoatha the way secrets always leave cities—quietly, before dawn, while the streets were still rubbing sleep from their eyes.

No banners. No guards escorting them in armor. Just a scholar who looked like he belonged anywhere, an archwizard who looked like he belonged nowhere, a farmer

with green hair and stubborn hope in her spine, and a plain young man wrapped in a pressure the world didn't know how to name.

They took the old stone road that climbed out of Hearthweave and bent toward the forest routes leading to Zeno. The farther they walked from the city's belly, the lighter the air felt—though Arken's aura still rose into the sky like a second atmosphere following them.

Elarion walked ahead half the time, hands tucked in his sleeves, humming to himself like the universe was a delicious joke. Jean stayed near Arken's left shoulder, watching not just the boy, but the *spaces around him*—the way reality kept trying to respond to what Arken didn't mean to say.

Alina floated on his right side, close enough to calm him without crowding him. She'd been quiet since Saltwake, but not distant. Quiet like someone choosing her words carefully so they'd land soft instead of sharp.

After an hour of steady travel, Elarion stopped at a clear ridge where the trees thinned and the sky opened wide.

"Good," he said, almost gleeful. "We're far enough from curious ears. Time to begin."

Arken slowed. "Begin what?"

"Containment," Jean answered before Elarion could make it sound like a candy store.

Elarion nodded. "Control, really. You're not a fountain that needs corking. You're a sea that needs a shoreline."

Arken swallowed. "How do I do that if I don't even feel it?"

"You will," Jean said. "But first we learn scale."

Elarion turned, eyes shining like he'd been waiting for this since the first Pulse. "We need to know how much *output* your vessel produces when you *choose* to release. That tells us what kind of storage and restraint you'll need later."

Arken blinked. "Output?"

"Spell pressure," Jean said. "How much you can pour out before your body reacts."

Arken's jaw tightened. "Last time I poured anything out, I almost died."

"And you lived," Elarion said brightly. "So now we do it carefully."

Jean shot the Magus a look that said *be normal for five minutes*, then softened his voice for Arken.

“We’ll start with a basic spell. Small. Safe. Something that uses structure, not force.”

Elarion clapped once. “Water-stream. Shower-tier. Every apprentice learns it to wash blood off their sleeves before dinner.”

Arken glanced at Jean. “Why water?”

Jean flicked his tail—habit he didn’t bother hiding. “Because it’s my school. And because Elarion thinks a storm should meet a river first.”

Elarion grinned. “Exactly.”

He gestured to the open sky above the ridge.

“If anything goes wrong,” the Magus said, “we fire upward. The sky is already saturated by your aura. A clean burst in a straight line won’t look like a new anomaly to distant senses. It’ll blend into the pressure you already wear.”

Arken nodded slowly, buying the logic.

Jean stepped beside him. “First, the words. Speak them once so your mind learns a shape to hold, even if your power doesn’t require it.”

He taught Arken the simple chant—short, old, the kind of thing kids in the academy muttered while splashing each other after training.

Arken repeated it awkwardly.

Then Elarion’s voice cut in, smooth and focused.

“Now ignore the words,” he said. “Picture it.”

Arken frowned. “Picture what?”

“The water,” Elarion said patiently, like explaining fire to someone who’d lived underground. “Not the spell. The *result*. Imagine a thin stream forming in your palm. Feel it cool. Feel it move. Your mind is the gate. That’s all stopping you from doing anything.”

Arken closed his eyes.

Nothing happened.

He opened them, confused.

Jean nodded. “Again. Don’t try to *force* it. Let the image exist like it already belongs.”

Try two: a misty sputter, like air coughing.

Try three: a soft trickle that fell between his fingers and vanished into the dirt.

Alina gasped like she’d just seen moonlight being born.

“That’s magic,” she whispered, stunned.

Elarion glanced at her. “Good eyes. Your turn.”

Alina startled. “Me?”

Jean nodded. “You’ve memorized sigils. You understand intention. You can do this.”

Alina hesitated, then stepped forward and copied the chant Jean gave her—simple heat-lighting, the sort of spell used to warm hands in winter.

Her voice shook, but the air obeyed.

A tiny glow sparked above her palm, warm as a candle.

She stared at it like it was a miracle she didn’t deserve to touch.

Arken turned, eyes wide, and smiled despite himself. “Alina… you did it.”

She flushed hard. “It’s small.”

“It’s yours,” Jean said quietly. “That matters.”

Elarion waved them onward. “Back to you, Arken. We’re counting tries, not feelings.”

By try six, the stream was steady.

By try eight, Arken could start and stop it.

By try ten, it flowed like a clean ribbon of water from his hand, smooth and obedient, no tremor in the air, no accidental shockwaves.

Arken blinked at his palm, genuinely surprised.

“That’s it?”

Jean exhaled, half relief, half exhaustion. “That’s your first shackle. Now you build more.”

Elarion’s grin turned sharp.

“Now,” he said, “push it.”

Arken’s head snapped up. “Push it how?”

“Not at people,” Jean said quickly. “Upward. We test ceiling without breaking roofs.”

Arken looked to the sky, then back to them.

“Everyone back up,” he said suddenly, dead serious. “Just in case.”

Jean and Alina exchanged a glance. Elarion’s eyes lit like a lunatic being handed fireworks.

They stepped back.

Arken planted his feet. He didn’t chant. He just closed his eyes and *decided*.

The air changed.

Not violently — just *heavier*; the way the world gets right before a thunderclap.

A tiny tremor rolled through the ground inside the radius of his aura. Pebbles danced. Leaves shivered. Jean felt the ridge itself hold its breath.

Arken lifted his hand toward the sky.

And the water-stream became a **river**.

It didn’t widen slowly. It didn’t ramp. It *erupted*—a roaring column of water shot upward as if the earth had cracked open into an ocean. The jet screamed like a raging tsunami forced through the throat of a dragon, blasting into the sky so hard the air split around it. Sunlight refracted in wild sheets. The column glittered green-white at its edges, not from color, but from the pressure of mana riding inside it.

Jean’s mouth went dry.

He’d seen battle-mages crack walls with water.

This wasn't cracking a wall.

This was trying to carve a new continent.

Alina stood frozen, hands half-raised, eyes huge with awe and fear melting together. Her hair rippled in the wind from the blast.

Elarion—

Elarion laughed.

Not politely. Not quietly.

A full-throated, maniacal laugh that burst out of him like he'd just watched the universe reveal its best secret.

“YES!” the Magus shouted over the roar, eyes shining. “That’s it! That’s the scale!”

The water didn’t arc. It didn’t fall.

It kept going.

Straight up, ripping through clouds, thinning into mist only after it had already punched so far past ordinary sky that Jean felt a weird, helpless certainty:

That just left the world.

Even Arken felt it, because his eyes opened mid-cast, startled by how endless his own output was.

“Uh—I think—is it still going?” he yelled.

Jean didn’t answer. He couldn’t. He was too busy being a scholar watching a natural disaster learn it can walk.

Elarion wiped at his cheek, still laughing. “Orbit,” he said like a delighted child. “You sent water past orbit.”

Arken’s face went pale. “Oh my god. How do I stop it?”

“Stop thinking it should continue,” Jean shouted.

Arken swallowed, shut his eyes, and *decided again*.

The column snapped off like a hose being turned shut.

A final tail of water whipped skyward, then the rest—still traveling with obscene momentum—kept sailing into the distance, beyond sight, beyond sense.

A soft sprinkle rained back down on them.

Cool drops on hot skin.

Silence smothered the ridge.

Alina blinked as if waking from a dream.

Elarion stood there glowing with joy and terror in equal measure.

Jean just... sighed.

A long, resigned breath that belonged to someone who'd just volunteered to teach a hurricane manners.

“This won’t be easy,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone. “Not control. Not the world. Not keeping his humility intact.”

Arken turned to him, eyes shaken. “I didn’t mean to do *that*.[”]

Jean put a hand on his shoulder, grounding him.

“I know,” he said. “And you stopped it. That’s progress.”

Arken swallowed hard, still staring up where the river had been.

Alina stepped closer and took his hand.

No hesitation now.

She looked from his palm to his face, and something settled in her expression like a vow.

“I’m with you,” she said softly. “Whatever this is. Whatever you become. I’m here.”

Arken’s throat tightened.

He nodded once, grateful and scared and a little broken.

Jean saw it and felt a flicker of relief. Alina was an anchor in a way spells couldn't replicate. She could soften his guilt without letting him drown in it. She could point him toward right and wrong without burning his spirit down.

A win for all of them.

Elarion finally exhaled, grin still too wide.

"Alright," he said, voice bright with purpose. "That was ceiling-testing. Next we build walls."

Jean groaned quietly.

Arken looked terrified.

Alina squeezed his hand.

And together they started walking again, leaving a damp ridge behind them and heading toward the elf forests—toward a continent of living trees that could survive the training of a boy who didn't know he was a storm yet, but was finally learning how to hold the rain in his own hands.

Chapter 12 — “When the Forest Felt the Tide”

Zeno POV (Elves)

The forest heard him first.

Not with ears. With root-memory.

Zeno was old enough to notice the difference between a storm and a *presence*. The leaves didn't shake from the wind. They shivered from saturation. Sap ran a little faster. Wards embedded in living bark tightened like muscles bracing for impact.

Then the elves felt it.

All of them.

Zeno's people were born with mana in their bones the way humans were born with breath. Even children could sense currents in the air, even if they couldn't name them. So when the horizon began to press against their skin, *every* household paused.

In treetop villages, mothers still went mid-braid. In woven-wood academies, instructors froze mid-lecture. In the hunting paths, scouts stopped and lifted their heads like deer catching scent.

It wasn't a spell.

It was a *walking sky*.

A weight of green so vast it turned distance into dread.

A little girl in a sun-nest on the eastern boughs started crying without knowing why. A young archer dropped his bowstring in trembling hands. An elder gardener pressed her palm to a living wall and whispered the oldest calming hymn she knew, because the trees were scared and the trees had taught her fear first.

Within the hour, messenger hawks were already slicing through the canopy.

Approaching mana mass.

Unclassified. Not a storm. Not a migration.

The response was immediate.

Zeno did not panic like cities did. Zeno prepared.

A spear-thin line of interception was formed: specialized mages in vine-woven robes, ward-warriors with leaf-steel armor, archers whose bows were carved from living branches that drank moonlight. They moved with disciplined silence, threading through the forest like a single organism.

And at the heart of their mobilization stood their ruler.

No king.

There hadn't been one in Zeno for as long as any tree remembered.

Only queens ruled here. A single crown, a single voice, because the forest didn't negotiate with chaos—it harmonized with it.

Queen Lysoria Vaelthorn watched from a high living platform grown from the oldest tree in the eastern reaches. She was tall, willowy in grace but not fragile in presence. Her hair was deep auburn braided with pale blossoms that never withered. Her skin carried the faint glow of leaf-veins under moonlight. Her eyes were a clear spring-green that could look gentle in peace and merciless in war.

Beauty in Zeno wasn't an ornament.

It was a warning carved in silk.

Lysoria wasn't young. She had ruled through famine seasons, demon border feints, and the quiet political rot that tried to creep into any long-lived civilization. She was serene the way ancient rivers were serene—because they had already outlasted everything that tried to frighten them.

When the scouts reported the pressure, she didn't flinch.

She only said, "Intercept. Don't provoke. Bring me the truth before the forest decides for us."

So the line advanced.

And the closer they got to the approaching presence, the more Zeno's army began to *suffer*.

Not from blows. Not from spells.

From **scale**.

The air grew heavier. Their mana instincts recoiled. Spells meant for detection wouldn't form—seeking-arts stalled in the throat of the world like swallowed water. Even steady hearts started to dizzy, because their bodies were trying to understand a pressure that had no ceiling.

One mage staggered and went to his knees.

An archer's vision swam and he collapsed silently into moss.

A ward-warrior minted to withstand dragon roars touched a tree for balance and fainted like a child.

The forest didn't judge them.

It simply learned *how big the thing was*.

They continued anyway, grim with discipline.

The pressure became wind.

Not literal wind. A force you could feel pushing at your spirit, like walking into a gale that came from *existence itself*. The nearer they pushed, the stronger it became. Their

cloaks fluttered even when leaves above them did not. Their breath came harder. Their wills had to lean forward just to remain upright.

By the time they reached the outer clearing where the road met Zeno's first living walls, only top leadership remained standing.

Queen Lysoria.

Her three Matron-Commanders.

Two senior archmagi who had survived the last demon incursion.

And the Arrow-Captain of the Eastern Boughs who looked like he was fighting the sky with his knees.

Everyone else lay unconscious behind them in soft moss, alive but overwhelmed.

Lysoria's gaze stayed forward.

Through the shimmering pressure, she saw them coming.

Four figures.

A coastal scholar.

A farmer woman.

A plain young human wrapped in green like a horizon.

And a pale archwizard whose eyes glittered like a man being offered a new world to dissect.

Lysoria lifted her chin.

The forest held its breath.

Arken's Group POV

Elarion had felt the change long before the elves were visible.

Not with seeking-arts—those still collapsed near Arken like thirsty things choking in a rainstorm. He felt it the old way: through the shift of ambient mana, through the way the world started *bracing*.

“The forest is moving,” he said quietly while they walked. “And not as prey.”

Jean tightened grip on his staff. “They noticed us.”

“Of course they noticed you,” Elarion said dryly. “The boy’s aura is a lighthouse. Zeno doesn’t ignore lighthouses. It decides whether to trust them.”

Alina glanced at Arken, worry in her eyes.

Arken looked apologetic already, like existing was another thing he might do wrong.

Elarion turned on his heel and faced them, sudden seriousness cutting through his usual delight.

“Listen carefully,” he said. “They are not demons, but they are not gentle gulls either. Do not cast. Do not insult. Do not panic. And for the love of every tree in this continent, do not touch their wards without permission.”

Arken blinked. “Uh... okay.”

Jean muttered, “He doesn’t even know what counts as stupid yet.”

“Then you will both keep him between you like a priceless glass jug,” Elarion replied, then added to Arken, softer but firm: “You are not in trouble. But your presence frightens people who aren’t used to feeling the sky kneel.”

Arken swallowed and nodded.

The pressure ahead thickened.

They rounded the last ridge and saw the elven line.

Or what remained of it.

Bodies scattered in moss behind a standing core. Proud warriors and mages laid out like a battlefield that hadn’t had time to bleed. Only the front remained upright—and even they looked like they were holding themselves up with will alone.

Elarion’s eyebrows lifted.

“Impressive discipline,” he murmured. “They didn’t run.”

Jean inhaled sharply. “They’re fainting just *approaching us*.”

Alina stepped closer to Arken instinctively, as if her nearness could soften the pressure for others too.

Arken looked sick. “I’m doing that?”

“Not on purpose,” Jean said at once. “Remember. Your aura is... large. They’re swimming in it without gills.”

Arken stared at the elves, guilt carving into him.

Elarion edged forward alone.

Jean grabbed his sleeve. “Magus, careful—”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Elarion said, voice bright but not reckless. “This is a parley, not a duel.”

He walked into the clearing with his hands visible and empty.

The elven front tensed.

Queen Lysoria didn’t move, but her commanders did. The Arrow-Captain raised his bow a fraction. One Matron-Commander spread her fingers and a living wardline rose half-formed before stalling in the saturated air, unable to finish its shape.

Elarion stopped at a respectful distance—far enough not to provoke, close enough to be heard.

“Queen of Zeno,” he called, voice smooth as tidewater. “I am High Magus Elarion Saevin, acting under writ of King Aurelian and Queen Seraphine of Yoatha.”

Lysoria’s eyes narrowed.

“You bring a storm to my forest,” she said evenly. Her Common was flawless, older dialect polished into crystal. “Explain before the trees decide to defend themselves.”

Elarion didn’t flinch.

“That is why I came forward alone,” he said. “The boy behind me is not a weapon. He is young, untrained, and carrying a mana scale neither he nor we fully understand. We are traveling to Zeno *because* Zeno can survive training accidents that would cripple a city.”

A murmur rippled through the remaining elven leaders—half outrage, half awe.

Lysoria’s voice stayed calm, but the iron was clear.

“You ask sanctuary while my soldiers faint just looking at him.”

“I ask permission to teach him under your oversight,” Elarion corrected gently. “Sanctuary only long enough to ensure he doesn’t harm anyone. If we cannot train him, he will remain an uncontrolled storm wherever he goes—including back toward your borders.”

Jean stepped forward a half-pace behind Elarion, careful not to cross the pressure line.

“I’m Jean of Saltwake,” he added. “I will be his moral guide. Elarion will be his restraint teacher. We will obey your conditions. We came to speak, not to trespass.”

Lysoria studied them—the scholar’s hard sincerity, the archwizard’s dangerous confidence, the farmer’s fearful loyalty, and the human boy who looked mortified to be feared at all.

Her gaze settled on Arken.

Arken lowered his head instinctively, not in submission like a prisoner, but in the embarrassed humility of someone who didn’t want to be a catastrophe.

Lysoria felt something shift inside her—not softness, not pity.

Recognition.

The most dangerous forces in history weren’t always cruel.

Sometimes they were just *lost*.

She lifted a hand.

Her commanders tensed, waiting.

“Do not come closer,” she said—firm, not unkind. “Remain exactly where you are. If I allow this, it will be under strict forest law and Matron oversight.”

Elarion inclined his head. “Reasonable.”

“And the boy will not cast without permission.”

Jean answered before Arken could panic. “Agreed.”

Lysoria held their eyes a moment longer.

Then she spoke a sentence that made the forest feel like it exhaled:

“Very well. We will not strike first. We will hear your proposal properly—at the Living Court. Under watch.”

Elarion’s smile was sharp with relief.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Behind him, Jean let out a breath he’d been holding for an entire continent.

Alina squeezed Arken’s hand.

Arken nodded, shaken but grateful.

And as Queen Lysoria turned to lead them deeper into Zeno—while her unconscious soldiers began to be carried back into the shade—everyone felt the truth settle in:

They had crossed into the one land on this planet where the world might be strong enough to teach a walking storm how to become a man...

without breaking the forest,

or breaking him.

Chapter 13 — “The Living Court”

If Yoatha was a rune-city built for trade and noise, Zeno was a spell written in wood.

The deeper they walked into the elf continent, the more Arken felt like he’d stepped into a breath that had been held for centuries. Houses weren’t built so much as *grown*—smooth bark halls arching between massive trunks, bridges of woven root and vine, lanterns that weren’t fire but bioluminescent blossoms coaxed open by song. Everything looked alive because everything *was*. The forest didn’t just surround the elves.

It cooperated with them.

Arken kept expecting to hear hammers or saws. Instead he heard wind-chimes, water trickles, and the low hum of living wards embedded into the trees like veins.

“Try not to look like you’re about to apologize to the continent,” Jean murmured beside him.

Arken blinked. “Am I?”

“You’re wearing that face,” Elarion chimed in ahead of them, not even turning around. “The one that says ‘I’m sorry for existing.’ It’s very human. Also very unhelpful.”

Arken frowned, half defensive. “*I am* causing problems.”

“Correct,” Elarion said cheerfully. “But you’re not causing them because you’re cruel. You’re causing them because you’re untrained. There’s a difference. One is a sin. The other is Tuesday.”

Jean shot him a look. “Don’t call a world-level event ‘Tuesday.’”

“Fine,” Elarion sighed theatrically. “Wednesday, then.”

Alina giggled softly, the first real laugh she’d let out since Saltwake. She leaned toward Arken just enough for him to hear.

“They’re doing it on purpose,” she whispered. “So you don’t spiral.”

Arken exhaled a shaky breath. “Is it working?”

“Hmm.” She tilted her head, pretending to study him like a physician. “You look only *sixty percent* doomed. Great improvement.”

Arken snorted. A real sound. It startled him how good it felt.

They reached a clearing so wide it felt like the forest had stepped back to make room for something sacred.

At its center stood the Living Court.

There were no stone pillars. No marble walls. The court was a ring of colossal trees braided together at the canopy, their trunks forming a natural colonnade. Between them, living platforms grew at different heights like amphitheater seats for a civilization that didn’t believe rulers needed to be distant to be respected.

At the heart of the ring, a throne-root rose from the earth, shaped by patient growth into something both beautiful and intimidating. Vines coiled around it like a crown resting on the forest’s spine.

Queen Lysoria waited there.

She hadn’t changed since the clearing. If anything, being in her own land made her presence sharper—stillness with teeth. Her three Matron-Commanders stood behind

her, faces stern but not hostile. Around the ring, elven elders watched in quiet ranks, their mana-senses tight with caution.

Arken felt the pressure of their eyes like sunlight through leaves.

He instinctively angled his body half a step in front of Alina, as if he could block danger from her just by existing between her and the world.

Jean noticed. Elarion noticed.

Lysoria *definitely* noticed.

Arken swallowed.

Okay. Don't look like you're apologizing to the continent.

Elarion stepped forward first and bowed.

“Your Majesty. Thank you for allowing us into your Living Court.”

Lysoria’s gaze flicked to Arken immediately after.

“You carry a storm,” she said to him, voice calm enough to make it scarier. “And storms do not enter forests without reason.”

Arken opened his mouth.

No clever speech rose.

No perfect explanation.

Just the truth.

“I didn’t choose this,” he said quietly. “But I’m not here to harm anything. I’m here because I need to learn how not to.”

A few elders shifted. Not impressed. Not dismissive.

Interested.

Lysoria studied him like a blade being tested for balance.

“You don’t seem arrogant,” she observed. “That’s either a virtue... or a mask.”

“I don’t know how to be arrogant about something that scares me,” Arken answered before he could overthink it.

Jean’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

Alina squeezed Arken’s fingers once, like *good*.

Elarion hid a grin like he’d just watched a student land their first clean strike.

Lysoria didn’t smile, but the edge in her eyes eased by a hair.

“What happened in Saltwake was a ward detonation,” she said, turning her focus to Elarion and Jean. “Your explanation was heard. My soldiers fainted because they approached a pressure they couldn’t contextualize. That is unacceptable in my borders.”

“Agreed,” Jean said. “That’s why we asked for your oversight.”

“Then tell me,” Lysoria said evenly. “Why should Zeno accept the risk of training him here?”

Elarion answered smoothly.

“Because Zeno is the only land on this planet that can survive accidental overflows without permanent devastation. You can regrow what breaks. You can heal what burns. And you can reinforce living wards around a training ground far more fastidiously than a stone city can.”

Lysoria’s voice cooled.

“You want to use my forest as a buffer for your mistakes.”

Arken flinched.

Before Jean could speak, Arken found his footing.

“That’s not what he means,” he said, a little stronger. “But if that’s what it becomes, I’d rather risk breaking trees that heal... than breaking people who don’t.”

The words came out clean. Honest. Unforced.

The elven elders went quiet in a different way.

Not fearful this time.

Measured.

Lysoria looked at him for a long beat.

Then she asked something sharp and dangerous:

“And why should I believe you’ll restrain yourself when fear strikes you again?”

Arken’s throat tightened.

Saltwake flashed in his memory—time freezing, his chest seizing, his hands lighting the world on instinct.

He wanted to say *I promise*.

But promises from the untrained were cheap.

So he said the truth again.

“Because I’m scared of myself too,” he admitted. “And because I don’t want to become someone who hurts the only people who’ve been kind to me here.”

He glanced at Alina without thinking.

She met his eyes steady as a sunrise.

“And because,” he added quietly, “I’m not alone.”

Jean felt a little of his dread loosen. That sentence mattered.

Lysoria listened like someone filing away a weapon’s shape for later.

Then she turned her gaze to Elarion.

“You,” she said. “High Magus. Are you certain you can teach him restraint?”

Elarion’s grin flickered into something genuinely serious.

“I’m certain I can start,” he said. “Restraint is a staircase. He’s already taken the first step. He stopped a spell that could have drowned a sky.”

“And if your teaching fails?”

Elarion didn’t dodge.

“Then I will be the first line between his overflow and your people,” he said calmly. “I will take responsibility for any harm done while he is under my instruction.”

Jean’s jaw tightened; he knew what a vow like that cost.

Lysoria’s eyes narrowed.

“Confidence,” she said softly. “Or arrogance.”

Elarion tipped his head. “Both, depending on the hour.”

Jean muttered under his breath, “That’s the most honest thing you’ve said all day.”

Elarion smirked. “See? I’m improving already.”

Alina hid a smile behind her hand.

Even Lysoria’s mouth twitched—barely.

“Very well,” the Queen said.

The Living Court seemed to lean forward as one.

“These are my conditions.”

She raised one finger.

“First: Arken trains only under Matron oversight and under the High Magus’s direct presence. He does not wander Zeno alone.”

Second finger.

“Second: no large-output casting unless explicitly approved by the Court or by me.”

Third finger.

“Third: if my forest decides he is a threat, I reserve the right to exile him immediately, regardless of Yoatha’s writ.”

Jean bowed. “Accepted.”

Elarion bowed. “Accepted.”

Alina bowed too, a heartbeat behind them.

Arken opened his mouth—

Then took a breath.

“Accepted,” he said.

Not meekly.

Not apologetically.

Like a man choosing the rules that would keep him from becoming a monster.

Lysoria studied him again.

Then tilted her head slightly.

“You are young,” she said. “But there’s iron in you. I can hear it.”

Arken blinked. “You can... hear iron?”

Her eyes went faintly amused.

“It’s an elven phrase,” she said dryly. “Meaning: you have a spine worth trusting.”

Arken felt heat climb his neck.

He didn’t know why the small approval hit harder than any fear had.

Elarion leaned toward him with a whisper that was definitely not subtle:

“That’s royal approval, boy. Try not to faint. It’s embarrassing for your brand.”

Arken shot him a sideways look. “My brand?”

Jean muttered, “Ignore him.”

Alina whispered, laughing, “He *is* your brand now. It’s too late.”

Arken tried to hold a serious face.

Failed.

A small grin escaped.

And for the first time since the roof and the thieves and the pulses and the exploding sigil...

Arken felt something warm bloom in his chest that wasn't fear.

It was *possibility*.

Lysoria stood, robes whispering like leaves.

"Prepare the Hollow Ring," she ordered her Matrons. "We begin containment training at dusk."

She looked back at Arken once more.

"You came to my forest a storm," she said. "I will see whether you leave it a guardian."

Arken swallowed.

Then nodded.

"Okay," he said quietly, but this time the word wasn't fragile.

It was the sound of someone stepping forward instead of shrinking back.

Jean watched him, relief threading through dread.

Alina squeezed his hand like she had no doubt.

Elarion's eyes shone like he'd just been handed a living comet.

And Zeno, ancient and alive, opened a path ahead—not without fear, but with just enough trust to let a storm learn how to become a man.

Chapter 14 — “The Lid That Wouldn’t Fit”

They arrived under full daylight.

Zeno in the sun was almost unfair. The forest didn't *glow*—it *lived*. Light slid through leaves in clean green sheets, dappling the ground like a thousand soft blessings. A living bridge carried them over a shallow river that sang as it ran. Houses curved from trunks in spirals of bark and blossom, as if architecture here was more gardening than building.

Arken felt small again.

Not in a bad way.

In the way you feel when you stand before something ancient that isn't trying to impress you... it just *is*.

Matron escorts guided them to a sheltered grove on the outskirts of the Living Court—an approved resting place meant for guests who might explode if they sneezed wrong. The “rooms” weren’t rooms. They were hollowed nooks grown into a great tree’s side, with soft moss bedding and hanging lanternfruit that breathed warm light.

Alina made it exactly three steps inside her nook before the weight of everything finally unhooked from her spine.

She didn’t even sit properly. She kind of...*folded*. Like a banner in a windless room. One blink she was standing, the next she was on the moss, already asleep.

Arken startled. “Alina?”

No answer. Just slow breathing and the peaceful, absolute surrender of someone who’s been running on courage longer than their body agreed to.

Jean watched her for a moment with something close to worry.

Elarion watched her with something close to pride.

Then the High Magus smirked and looked at Jean.
“Well,” he said softly, “she lasted a while.”

Jean snorted. “Not everyone is built like a scholar with a death wish.”

Elarion hummed, amused, then glanced at Arken. “Don’t take it personally, boy. This isn’t weakness. It’s physics.”

Arken blinked. “Physics?”

“Yes,” Elarion said, tapping his temple. “Her system is brand new to mana. Today she felt a continent’s pressure, a ruler’s gaze, and your aura at full intensity... *while* learning her first spells. That’s like asking someone who just discovered legs to sprint a marathon.”

Jean nodded. “Her mind and body have been stretching every day since you fell onto her roof. You’re overwhelming by nature. The more she senses you, the more it strains her capacity.”

Arken’s stomach sank. “So I’m hurting her.”

Elarion waved that thought away like a fly. “You’re *overloading* her, yes. Hurting her? No. Because you also keep healing her. Constantly. Whether you mean to or not.”

Jean added, quieter, “Your aura repairs what breaks. Mental fatigue, bruises, micro-tears in muscle, stress fractures in spirit... it smooths them out. We’re all going to grow stronger just by standing near you.”

Elarion flexed his fingers like he was testing new joints. “I thought I hit my limit twice today. Still standing. Still breathing. Still annoyingly alive.”

Arken looked between them, guilt mixing with a shy flicker of relief. “So she’ll be okay?”

“She’ll be more than okay,” Elarion said. “If she keeps choosing to learn? She might end up with the sharpest growth curve among us. Raw talent plus your field is... a very unfair combination.”

Jean glanced toward Alina’s nook again, then back to Arken.

“She trusts you enough to sleep in the middle of the day,” he said softly. “In a foreign continent. Under the roof of strangers. That’s not small.”

Arken swallowed. That hit him harder than any lecture.

“She feels safe,” Jean added. “Let her.”

Arken nodded slowly.

They left Alina resting and stepped out into the grove.

Zeno’s daylight made the world feel gentle.

Arken’s aura did not.

Even here, even in the quiet, the pressure rose around him like a sea that refused to stop being deep just because a shore asked nicely.

Elarion rubbed his hands together, eyes bright.

“Alright,” he said. “Before we explore the city, we try to put a lid on the storm.”

Arken grimaced. “We tried already.”

“We try again but smarter,” Elarion replied. “Training isn’t repetition. It’s *iteration*. ”

They spent the entire afternoon working.

Elarion had Arken practice **containment imagining**—not “stop the mana,” but “shape the boundary.” Picture a shoreline. Picture a cup. Picture a skin holding breath inside. Arken tried. Tried hard. The aura *trembled*, compressed for a blink, then surged back like water refusing a dam.

Jean taught **breath timing**—not because Arken needed chantcraft, but because breath is a metronome for will. “Inhale: gather. Exhale: hold. You’re teaching your mind rhythm so your power has a pattern to follow.”

Arken tried. The rhythm helped his spells.

It didn’t help his aura.

They moved to **micro-output drills**—thread-thin water streams, a drop of light, a pebble levitation no bigger than a fingernail.

Arken mastered each in minutes.

The aura still bled into the sky like a second dawn.

By sunset, Elarion was pacing in circles like a cat that couldn’t remember why it walked into a room.

“It’s not obeying because it’s not a *spell*,” he muttered. “It’s a state.”

Jean leaned against a tree, tired in the eyes but steady in the spine. “A default, not a cast.”

Arken sank to the moss, rubbing his face. “So what do we do?”

Elarion opened his mouth—

Then a fresh wave of fatigue hit Arken like a sudden stone.

His shoulders sagged. His breathing slowed. The day’s strain that his aura had been ignoring finally remembered the human vessel it lived inside.

Arken blinked once.

Twice.

Then he tipped sideways and passed out mid-sentence, like someone turned the power off.

Jean moved instantly, kneeling, checking breath and pulse.

“He’s fine,” Jean said. “Just exhausted.”

Elarion froze.

The air changed.

Not dramatically.

But unmistakably.

The pressure **dropped**.

The sky above them didn’t feel kneeling anymore. The saturation loosened. Spells that had felt like trying to breathe underwater suddenly felt possible again.

Elarion’s head snapped up, eyes wide.

“His mana is *normal* again!” he blurted.

Jean blinked. “What?”

Elarion took a step back, then forward, giddy shock colliding with calculation.

“The aura shrank,” he said quickly. “It’s still there, but it’s not spilling into the heavens. It’s like... like his vessel finally went into sleep-mode and sealed itself.”

Jean stared at Arken’s sleeping face.

Then exhaled a breath equal parts relief and dread.

“So exhaustion triggers containment.”

Elarion nodded too fast. “Yes. Yes, yes. If his mind is the gate, then when the mind shuts down, the gate closes by default.”

Arken's breathing deepened peacefully, completely unaware that he'd just revealed the first reliable lever on his own divinity.

Elarion crouched beside him, half laughing, half reverent. "We just have to wear him out. Keep him tired enough to rest. Not forever—but until he learns to do this while awake."

Jean rubbed his temple. "He can't heal people like that."

"Not while asleep," Elarion said, shrugging. "But it doesn't matter. It gives *him* rest. It gives *us* breathing room."

Jean's gaze turned thoughtful in that dangerous way it did when he was building a theory.

"And if something breaks during training," he murmured, eyes flicking to the living trees, "your aura will heal it... as long as you're awake. Zeno's recovery arts plus your field means accidents won't spiral into catastrophe."

Elarion grinned. "Exactly. You see why I wanted Zeno? It's the only place on this planet where training a storm doesn't equal a funeral."

Jean looked at Arken again, the sleeping boy who could drown the sky by accident.

"This will still be hard," Jean said quietly. "Exhaustion is not a solution. It's a crutch."

"A useful crutch," Elarion replied. "Until he grows legs for restraint."

Jean gave him a flat look. "Why are you suddenly poetic?"

Elarion smirked. "Because we're teaching a god-child to nap responsibly. It deserves poetry."

Jean snorted despite himself.

Then his face sobered.

"I'm telling the Queen everything," Elarion said. "All of it. The exhaustion trigger, the healing field, the risks. No surprises later."

Jean nodded. "She'll respect that."

"And set ten new rules," Elarion added cheerfully.

“Probably,” Jean agreed.

They lifted Arken carefully, carrying him back toward the guest grove where Alina still slept in daylight peace.

As they walked under Zeno’s moon-leaning canopy, Jean felt the sheer weight of the job settle over his shoulders again.

He wasn’t just teaching spells.

He was teaching a walking storm how to stay kind when the world would eventually beg him to become cruel.

Not easy.

But as he glanced toward the sleeping boy and remembered Alina’s stubborn hand in his—

He let himself believe, just a little, that they weren’t doing this alone.

And that was the first real advantage they’d had since the sky learned Arken’s name.

Chapter 15 — “A Week Under Still Water”

Arken didn’t wake the next morning.

Or the next.

A day became three. Three became seven.

At first, Jean said it was normal exhaustion. Human vessels needed rest. The aura seal had proven sleep could shut the overflow down; this was probably just the body catching up.

But by day four, even Jean’s voice started to crack around the edges.

By day five, Alina stopped pretending she wasn’t counting his breaths.

By day six, Elarion stopped making jokes.

They were all terrified in their own ways.

Jean kept checking pulse and pupils like a man trying to solve death with discipline. Alina sat near his bedding and whispered little things she didn’t even know if he could

hear.

Elarion prowled the training grove like a caged storm, running theories in circles because for once the mystery wasn't fun.

Zeno's Matrons didn't intervene. They watched. They trusted the three of them to have already earned their fear.

And in that whole silent week, Arken drifted.

Not through Zeno.

Through memory.

He dreamed of his old world.

Not the heroic parts. No grand goodbye. Just the real, ordinary life he'd been in one blink before it erased him.

Late nights with blue light on his face.

Work that dragged past midnight.

Games that swallowed weekends.

Moments of being a good husband that he *did* cherish — but even those were squeezed between obligations like a candle trying to survive in wind.

He saw himself constantly **working**, constantly **doing**, constantly **producing**.

And the cruel little truth his dream wouldn't let him dodge was simple:

He never made time to live.

Even when he was happy, he was sprinting.

Even when he loved people, he loved them *while exhausted*.

Even when he did what was right, he did it with nothing left in his tank.

That's where exhaustion lived in him — not as a moment, but as a **habit**.

The dream showed him the night he died.

Not dramatic. Not glorious. Just... too much weight stacked on a body that had been carrying "too much" for years.

He felt the collapse again.

Then the strange softness he fell into afterward.

Everything → nothing → waves → feeling → green awareness.

He remembered the first time he floated above Yoatha as pure sentient light.

That weightless, lucid clarity.

That **green pulse feeling**.

And he realized something that made his dream-heart stutter:

It was the same feeling he got right before casting.

The same internal *shift*.

The same boundary dissolving.

The same sense of reality waiting for him to speak a command.

The dream lingered there, letting him memorize it like a password.

Then it drifted into something gentler.

He saw himself doing what he secretly loved most back on Earth:
coding, math, solving problems until the world clicked into place.

It wasn't even about money or grades.

It was about the feeling of understanding.

He was in the middle of an equation in his dream — numbers swimming, logic forming
— and he got it **wrong**.

Just slightly.

The kind of wrong that used to make him sit up and go, *wait—no, that doesn't balance*.

His mind jolted.

His dream snapped.

And Arken's eyes shot open.

BOOM.

The aura roared back into existence like a sky remembering it had gravity.

Green pressure flooded the grove. Leaves shook. Birds burst from branches. Mana thickened in a hard, sudden wave.

Jean actually staggered.

Alina gasped and grabbed the bedframe.

Elarion, gods bless him, straight-up **wobbled** like a man who forgot how heavy the world was.

Because they'd had a week without that pressure.

Their bodies had adapted to *quiet*.

So when the storm returned, it hit like stepping from shade into a noon sun you weren't ready for.

Some nearby elves toppled immediately — Matrons included — not harmed, just overwhelmed by the sudden return of scale.

Arken blinked around, alarmed. “What— why is everyone—”

Jean exhaled so hard it was half laugh, half prayer.

“You’re awake,” he said, voice rough. “That’s why.”

Alina was already at Arken’s side, hands on his shoulders like she was anchoring him to the world.

“Seven days,” she whispered, eyes wet with relief. “You slept seven days.”

Arken’s mouth parted. “Seven— why?”

Elarion, pale but grinning like a lunatic who’d missed his favorite toy, leaned in.

“Because your human body finally cashed in every debt you’d been dodging for years,” he said. “Congratulations. You’ve discovered rest. I’ve been trying to teach scholars that for centuries.”

Jean shot him a look. “Be normal.”

Elarion nodded, absolutely not normal. “Fine. I’m normal. The boy slept a week and rebooted his aura by thinking about math wrong. Nothing to see here.”

Arken stared. “I... woke up because I made a mistake in a dream.”

Jean nodded slowly, piecing it together. “Mental spark. The gate opened. The overflow returned.”

Elarion’s eyes glittered. “And you *remembered the feeling*. Didn’t you?”

Arken froze.

Because he had.

That light-state threshold.

That green pulse clarity.

The exact internal sensation of “casting” even without words.

He swallowed.

“...Yeah,” he said quietly. “I remember.”

Jean’s shoulders loosened a little.

Alina smiled through the fear.

Elarion looked delighted in the most dangerous, helpful way possible.

“Good,” the Magus said softly. “That means we don’t start from scratch anymore. We start from .”

Arken looked around at the fainted elves, the shaken grove, his friends half-relearning how to breathe under his sky.

Then he looked back at his own hands.

Not with horror this time.

With a new kind of seriousness.

“Okay,” he said. “Teach me again. For real.”

Jean nodded. “We will.”

Alina squeezed his arm. “We’re here.”

Elarion grinned like a starved philosopher offered a feast.

“And now,” he said, “we test whether you can *open the gate without drowning the world.*”

The storm had woken.

But so had the boy inside it.

Chapter 16 — “Iterations, Not Miracles”

Zeno didn’t give them time to baby-step.

The moment Arken woke and the sky-wide aura returned, Queen Lysoria’s Matrons escorted them straight to the Hollow Ring—a wide, reinforced training grove where living wards wove a tight lattice through bark, air, and root. The grove was designed to bend, heal, and survive. It was also designed to *watch*.

Arken stood at the center with moss under his boots and a whole continent holding its breath somewhere behind the trees.

Elarion cracked his knuckles like he was about to cook. Jean folded his arms like he was about to judge. Alina sat on a stump nearby with a blanket over her shoulders, blinking the sleep out of her system and trying not to look like the mana was making her brain do cartwheels again.

“Alright, boy,” Elarion said, circling Arken once like a hawk that forgot it was a teacher. “Same goal as before: lid the spill. Not a spell. Not a dam. A *boundary*.”

Arken nodded. “Like holding breath?”

“Exactly.” Jean tapped his own chest. “Inhale: gather. Exhale: hold. Picture your aura shrinking to your skin. Not because you’re forcing it... but because you’re *allowing it a shape.*”

Arken closed his eyes.

The aura trembled.

For a second, it *tightened*. The pressure lessened like the sky relaxing its shoulders.

Then it slipped right back up into the heavens like a lazy dragon stretching after a nap.

Elarion clicked his tongue. “One percent.”

Arken opened one eye. “One percent?”

Jean nodded. “That’s what it felt like. A tiny reduction.”

They tried again.

And again.

Each attempt was real progress—micro-compression, a blink of containment—then rebound. But the rebound was slightly less aggressive each time. Like the ocean learning the rhythm of a shoreline it didn’t know it needed.

By midday, Arken was sweating, jaw set, hair damp against his forehead. His human vessel was doing its best not to combust under the effort of disciplining an infinite sea.

Elarion watched the aura’s pulse pattern with maddening delight.

Jean watched Arken’s face with maddening concern.

Alina watched both with the affectionate terror of someone who cared too much to be calm.

Finally Arken staggered back a step, panting.

“This is insane,” he muttered. “It’s like trying to hold down... the sun.”

“Yeah,” Elarion agreed cheerfully. “That’s why we’re doing it here and not in Yoatha. The sun tends to take buildings personally.”

Jean sighed. “Progress is progress. But one percent per attempt means this will take time.”

Arken wiped his face, thinking hard.

Time.

Training.

Percent gains.

In his old life, that word—*percent*—had meant something.

He stared at the forest floor, mind already sliding into patterns the way it used to when he coded or solved a hard equation in his head.

Then he went very still.

Jean noticed first. “Arken?”

Arken didn't answer.

He knelt.

And started drawing in the dirt with a stick.

Lines. Arrows. Symbols. A rough equation taking shape like a private language dragged into sunlight.

Alina leaned forward, curious and immediately overwhelmed.

Jean squinted. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking," Arken said, voice distant. "Hold on."

Elarion blinked, delighted. "Oh good. He's about to do something reckless and intelligent. My favorite combination."

Arken ignored him and finished the equation.

Then he sat back on his heels and pointed.

"Okay. So... I noticed something when I try to compress it. It's not just my will fighting overflow. It's like force creates *condensation*."

Jean frowned. "Condensation?"

"Like... when mana is dense, it behaves differently," Arken said, searching for words in this language he still wasn't fully fluent in. "The more pressure I put inward, the more it condenses. When it condenses, it takes *less volume* to exist. Less volume means less outward pressure. That means I don't need to keep forcing so hard to hold it."

He tapped his arrows.

"So if I can *start* with a big force to condense it once, the next time I compress, I'm compressing *less volume*."

Alina blinked like she'd been handed three books at once. "Wait... what?"

Arken tried again, simpler.

"It's like MMO scaling," he said automatically, then realized he'd used a weird term. "Um— like... training stats. When you level a skill enough, each next level costs less effort because your base power got tighter. So the percent drops get bigger."

Jean stared.

Elarion stared.

Both of them looked like people who were *almost* getting it but didn't want to admit they weren't there yet.

Arken took a breath and pushed one more time.

"Right now each try lowers the aura by one percent. Because the mana is still loose. Like fog." He made a spreading gesture. "But if I condense a *lot* at once—like forcing fog into a crystal—then the next compression isn't one percent. It might be five. Ten. Because the mana's structure changes."

Jean's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You're describing an exponential containment curve."

Arken's face lit a little. "Yes! Exactly!"

Elarion's grin sharpened like a blade finding its purpose.

"You want to brute-condense your field," he said. "Make it *cohere* at a higher density so your baseline spill reduces."

Arken nodded hard. "But I think it needs a big cast to trigger the first condensation spike."

Alina's head was, in fact, spinning. She rubbed her temples. "So... you need to do something huge... to be able to do smaller things easier?"

"Pretty much," Arken admitted. "Terrible idea. But maybe the right one."

Jean exhaled slowly.

"Not terrible," he said. "Dangerous. There's a difference."

Elarion laughed softly. "Oh I *love* this boy."

Jean shot him a warning look. "We are not doing a large output cast without permission."

Arken nodded again. "I know."

He looked toward the canopy, toward the distant Court, then back at them.

“So... we ask.”

Elarion straightened, already moving like a man who was born to argue with queens.

“I’ll take him,” he said. “You stay here with Alina. Keep training small containment while we’re gone. No experiments. No surprises.”

Jean raised a brow. “You say that like it stops surprises.”

Elarion smirked. “It doesn’t. It just makes me feel morally organized.”

Arken stood, still a little shaky but with something new in his spine.

Confidence—not arrogance, not fear.

The confidence of someone who finally found a lever inside his own infinity.

He glanced at Alina.

She looked exhausted... but proud.

“Be careful,” she whispered.

Arken nodded. “Always.”

Jean clapped his shoulder once. “You did good today. That idea? That was you thinking like yourself again. Keep that.”

Arken gave a small, real smile.

Then he followed Elarion out of the Hollow Ring, toward the Living Court’s root-throne, toward a Queen who guarded her forest like a mother guards her child.

And for the first time since waking, Arken wasn’t walking like a storm trying not to exist.

He was walking like a storm that finally believed it could learn to choose where the rain fell.

Chapter 19 — “Proof Under Open Sky”

Arken walked toward the Living Court like someone who’d just solved an equation that might save his life.

Not cocky. Not relaxed.

But focused.

He didn't speak much on the way. The plan was too loud in his head.

Force → condensation → smaller volume → easier containment → bigger % per attempt.

Repeat. Scale safely. Repeat smarter.

He kept mentally rehearsing the spell structure, the ceiling he'd aim for, the way he'd stop if the vessel screamed. He ran through it like a raid mechanic he refused to wipe on again.

Elarion noticed, of course.

"You're plotting," the Magus said lightly, matching pace beside him.

Arken didn't look away from the path. "I'm not plotting. I'm... iterating."

Elarion's grin twitched. "Same thing, different robes."

Arken finally glanced at him. "You think she'll allow it?"

“That depends,” Elarion said, breezy as wind through leaves, “on whether you look like a boy asking for permission... or a storm asking for discipline.”

Arken frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“It means don’t beg,” Elarion replied. “Explain. Show intent. Show control. Queens can smell fear the way sharks smell blood.”

“That’s comforting.”

“Oh, it gets worse,” Elarion said cheerfully. “She’s an elf queen. Their patience is measured in centuries. If you bore her, she’ll exile you before you finish blinking.”

Arken stared. “Wait, seriously?”

Elarion patted his shoulder. “Relax. You’re interesting. That’s basically your entire problem.”

Arken huffed a laugh despite himself.

Good.

He needed that.

They entered the Living Court under high daylight, the same ring of massive braided trees, the same root-throne, the same quiet ranks of elders watching like the forest's own conscience.

Queen Lysoria waited already seated, serene as ever.

But Arken could tell something had shifted.

She wasn't here to listen today.

She was here to measure.

Elarion bowed first.

"Your Majesty."

"Magus." Her eyes slid immediately to Arken. "You requested audience for large-output casting permission."

Arken nodded, trying to keep his breathing steady. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Why?" Lysoria asked simply.

Arken inhaled.

No rambling.

No apologies.

Just the truth in a clean line.

“I think I found a way to increase my containment rate,” he said. “But it requires one controlled high-output cast to trigger the first condensation. After that, I can reduce the spill faster and safer.”

Lysoria’s face didn’t change.

Her eyes did.

They sharpened with that quiet predator focus rulers get when someone says a sentence that could be genius or catastrophic.

“You are asking to cast a spell you barely understand,” she said. “That is not how Zeno survives.”

Arken opened his mouth—

She raised a hand.

“No. Speak clearly.” Her voice was calm enough to make the air colder. “What spell. What scale. What stopping condition. What risk.”

Arken swallowed.

Right.

She wasn't going to allow vague hope to walk free in her forest.

He took a breath and laid it out like a report.

"Spell: water-jet compression cast," he said. "Not for damage. For pressure inward. Scale: aimed upward only, into open sky, with a hard stop the moment your Matrons signal distress or my vessel reacts." He tapped his chest lightly. "Stopping condition is my exhaustion marker—the same one that sealed my aura last time. If my heartbeat spikes or my vision narrows, I stop immediately. If I can't stop, Elarion takes control."

Elarion nodded smoothly. "I will train him to use it, Your Majesty. I can micromanage the flow if required."

Lysoria stared at him a long beat.

Then—still looking at Arken—she said:

"You can't simply cast because you want to. You must know what you are casting and at what scale before I can allow it."

Arken didn't flinch.

“I do,” he said.

“Prove it.”

Elarion inclined his head again. “I will train him to use it, Your Maj—”

“No,” Lysoria cut in.

The Court went still.

Her gaze finally flicked to Elarion, cool and absolute.

“He will use it right now.”

Elarion blinked. “Right now?”

“I want to see your progress with my own eyes,” the Queen said. “If I am to risk my forest for your training theory, I will not gamble on secondhand confidence.”

Arken’s stomach tightened.

Elarion’s eyes brightened.

Jean was going to hate this.

Lysoria rose from the throne-root like the decision had already been made in her bones.

“Outside,” she said.

No flourish. No drama. Just command.

The elders and Matron-Commanders moved with her, flowing toward a higher clearing beyond the Living Court where the canopy opened into a wide dome of sky.

Arken followed, heart thudding.

Elarion leaned in with a whisper as they walked.

“You wanted efficiency?” he murmured. “Congratulations. You’re getting the boss fight early.”

Arken shot him a look that was half panic, half amusement. “You’re not helping.”

Elarion smirked. “I am helping. If you can perform under a Queen’s gaze, you can perform under anything.”

They reached the open clearing.

It was designed like the Hollow Ring but larger—an emergency casting field for national-level threats. Living wards spiraled at the perimeter in layered concentric rings. The ground was soft with moss, but the air felt reinforced, like the forest itself had braced its ribs.

Queen Lysoria stood at the edge of the field.

Her commanders remained behind her, hands near weapons not because they expected betrayal, but because that was the price of guarding a civilization.

Lysoria's voice carried cleanly.

"Arken."

He stepped forward.

The air grew heavier around him out of habit.

He forced his breathing into Jean's rhythm anyway.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She pointed up.

“Demonstrate your controlled high-output cast. Upward only. I will stop you if needed.”

Arken nodded.

He glanced once at Elarion.

The Magus gave him a small, sharp look that said you've got this, and for once it wasn't teasing.

Arken exhaled slowly.

Then closed his eyes.

For a heartbeat, fear tried to crawl up his throat.

What if I mess up?

What if I prove her right?

What if I hurt them?

Then he remembered his own equation in the dirt.

He remembered the feeling of the light-state in his dream.

He remembered that he wasn't guessing anymore.

He was testing a lever.

Arken opened his eyes.

The fear was still there.

But he stepped in front of it instead of behind it.

"Okay," he said softly.

Not as a plea.

As a choice.

He raised his hand to the sky—

—and the forest watched a storm begin to learn, on purpose, how to shape itself.

Chapter 20 — “Equal Pressure”

The emergency clearing was silent enough to hear sap moving.

Queen Lysoria stood at the edge of the ward-field, still as a drawn bow. Her Matron-Commanders watched with the kind of focus reserved for storms and assassins. Elders ringed the perimeter like the forest's memory given faces.

Above them, the sky waited.

Arken stepped into the center and breathed the way Jean taught him.

Inhale — gather.

Exhale — hold.

His aura still rose high, a pale green tide pushing at leaf and air. But now he could *feel* it, the way you feel your shoulders tense when you're angry.

He understood the gate.

He understood the weight.

And he understood the lever he'd built in his own mind.

Elarion hovered at the boundary, not casting, just watching with bright, hungry eyes. He looked like a man about to witness his favorite myth become inconveniently real.

"Begin," Lysoria said.

Arken lifted his hand to the open sky.

No chant.

No drama.

Just intent.

He pictured the spell not as a burst, but as **pressure inward**—like folding a vast, loose fog into a tighter shape.

The first cast went up as a clean water-jet, thinner than the Saltwake torrent but still powerful enough to make the air shiver. It tore straight into the blue and vanished.

Arken didn't look away. He *felt* the recoil and didn't flinch.

Second cast.

Third.

Each one was controlled. Each one was aimed into the same column of sky, like threading a needle over and over.

And each time he did it, his aura **tightened**.

Not by the pitiful one-percent dips of yesterday.

More.

A lot more.

The pressure that had been spilling as a second atmosphere began compressing toward him like the world finally remembered where his edges were supposed to be. Leaves stopped trembling. The ward-air lost its “about to break” tension.

The elders murmured softly.

Elarion’s face shifted from delighted to *stunned*.

Arken’s expression stayed locked in focus. He was running his loop.

Force → condense.

Condense → less volume.

Less volume → easier force.

Repeat.

After the tenth cast, Queen Lysoria raised her hand.

Arken stopped instantly.

Silence returned to the clearing.

Then the Matron-Commanders stepped forward, palms glowing faintly with living gauge-sigils. They weren’t seeking his *location* anymore. Seeking-arts were for tracking. This was measurement—old elven craft meant to read pressure like a physician reads pulse.

They circled him once.

Their eyes narrowed.

One of them looked at Elarion, startled.

Another looked at the Queen.

Then the lead Matron spoke, voice low with disbelief.

“...His baseline pressure is now equal to the High Magus.”

The clearing went **still**.

Jean’s jaw actually dropped.

Elarion blinked like he’d been slapped by joy.

Arken stood there breathing hard, listening to the words land.

Equal.

Not in total power. Not even close.

But the **spill**. The outward weight. The thing that had made armies faint and trees quietly suffer while healing back.

Arken had made his storm *sit*.

Elarion let out a slow laugh, half pride and half terror.

“You did it,” he breathed to Arken. “You actually did it.”

Jean’s eyes were on Arken’s face, searching for arrogance, searching for fear.

He found neither.

Arken looked like someone who’d just learned he could lift a mountain and *still chose not to throw it*.

Lysoria stepped forward.

Her voice was calm, but there was something warm threading through it now—something that hadn’t been there before.

“Then it is worth the effort,” she said.

And for the first time since they’d met her, the forest around the Court felt like it **relaxed**.

Elves didn't celebrate the way cities did.

They didn't throw noisy festivals because they were bored.

They celebrated because the forest itself needed to **anchor joy** into the world the way it anchored roots into soil. To them, survival wasn't enough. Survival deserved singing.

So when word spread that the walking storm had learned to hold his sky in his hands...

Zeno feasted.

Lantern-blossoms were coaxed brighter along the walkways. Tables grown from living wood unfolded from trunks like open palms. Long woven cloths were laid under the canopy, laden with foods Arken couldn't name but could definitely appreciate.

There were roasted river-fish glazed in honey-bark.

Fruit that fizzed lightly on the tongue.

Silver-leaf bread that crunched like a polite miracle.

And wine.

Elves *liked* wine.

Not because they were reckless.

Because they were old enough to be honest about how heavy the world could feel without help.

The Living Court turned into a glowing grove of laughter, music, and clinking cups. Even Matrons loosened their shoulders once the Queen herself raised a glass.

Arken tried to stay on the edge at first—watching, half-smiling, not sure how to exist inside celebration that was *about him*.

Alina found him anyway.

She always did.

She bumped her shoulder lightly into his. “You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?” Arken asked.

“The ‘I don’t belong here’ thing.”

He opened his mouth to deny it.

Failed.

She grinned into her cup. “You do. Tonight, at least.”

Before Arken could reply, Queen Lysoria approached.

The entire grove shifted subtly—lowers voices, respectful space opening around her. Not fear. Not stiff obedience. More like the way trees make room for sunlight because they *trust it*.

Lysoria’s cheeks were faintly flushed from wine. Not sloppy. Not unfocused. Just enough warmth to sand the edge of royalty into something more human.

She stopped in front of Arken.

“This celebration is for you,” she said plainly.

Arken blinked. “For... me?”

“For what you chose to become,” Lysoria corrected, and then—unexpectedly—she bowed.

Not deep. Not submissive.

A monarch’s bow, offered as recognition.

“I name you Guardian of Zeno’s eastern reaches,” she said, voice carrying just enough for the Court to hear. “And by extension, guardian of a world that will one day need your restraint more than your wrath.”

Arken froze.

He didn’t know what to do with that much honor.

Lysoria smiled faintly, seeing it on his face.

“You hold a mana pool the size of myth,” she said quietly. “I felt it when you first stepped into my border. It was like the horizon learned how to walk. The trees told me they were frightened of you.”

Arken’s stomach tightened.

“But,” Lysoria continued, eyes bright with old awe, “your pressure was killing them softly... and you were healing them faster than they could die. You made my forest stronger by existing inside it. You made my people stronger just by being near them.”

She lifted her cup toward him.

“For that, I thank you.”

Arken swallowed hard and bowed back, awkward but sincere.

“Thank you for not... for not striking first.”

Lysoria’s eyes warmed. “You gave me no reason to.”

Then she stepped away, leaving a ripple of murmurs and lifted glasses in her wake.

Arken turned back to Alina, still trying to process being bowed to by a queen.

She was looking at him differently.

Not scared.

Not just proud.

Curious.

The way you look at someone when you realize you’ve been living beside a secret and you finally want to know the person inside it.

“Arken,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She took a sip, then looked right into him, wine-brave and Alina-direct.

“We don’t talk much about *you*. Not your power. You.”

He blinked, uncertain. “Okay.”

She tilted her head. “What do you like? What makes you happy when you’re not... saving me or stopping the sky?”

Arken laughed softly, caught off guard. “That’s a question.”

“I’m impatient,” she admitted, almost sheepish, almost not. “And you’re frustratingly quiet. So I’m asking.”

He searched her face, then answered honestly.

“I liked puzzles,” he said. “Systems. Games where you could grow forever if you learned how. I liked math. I liked building things that weren’t supposed to work until they did.”

Alina nodded slowly, filing it away.

Then her eyes sharpened with a different kind of bravery.

“And love?”

Arken went still.

Alina’s cheeks were warm now, but her gaze was steady.

“How do you feel about your wife?” she asked quietly. “From your other... somewhere.”

Arken’s throat tightened.

Alina lifted a hand immediately. “I know it’s sudden. I’m sorry. It’s just... I need to know something. Anything.”

Her voice softened. “Technically you’re not married anymore, right? Not here. But do you still think about her? Do you still... like her?”

The grove noise blurred.

Arken stared at his cup like answers lived inside it.

He thought of a room lit by monitors.
Of hands he’d held.
Of a life that ended without letting him say goodbye.

“I... sometimes do,” he said slowly. “Yeah. I feel for her. I don’t know what that means now. It’s... weird.”

Alina stared at him a breath longer.

Then she stepped closer.

Close enough that the rest of the feast folded into background.

Her lips curved faintly.

Even half-t tipsy, she knew exactly what she was doing.

“Even if I do this?” she whispered.

Then she kissed him.

Not a peck.

A real kiss—steady, warm, lasting long enough that Arken forgot to breathe for half of it. Long enough that the world felt like it had softened around a single point.

When she pulled back, her eyes were bright and unreadable.

She didn’t wait for an answer.

She stood, smoothed her skirt like nothing had happened, and walked away into the lantern-glow.

Leaving Arken there with his heart loud and his mind on fire.

He sat alone for a while, staring into the canopy.

The kiss wasn’t what shook him most.

It was the **familiarity** of the feeling he’d been chasing since he woke.

The moment before a spell.

The moment of deciding.

That pulse of clarity.

He finally understood why it felt like coding a solution into reality.

Because that’s exactly what he was doing.

He wasn’t “casting” the way mages did.

He was **writing**.

In his head, he was building spell-logic the way he used to build systems.

Function → output.

Constraint → boundary.

Intent → command.

His chest thudded with a dangerous kind of excitement.

If I can write spells... then I can... create them.

He needed Jean.

He needed Elarion.

He turned, scanning the grove.

They were nowhere.

Either asleep already or swept into some elven drinking contest that ended in tactical unconsciousness. Very on-brand for both of them, honestly.

Arken swallowed and felt a reckless itch under his skin.

Just a test.

A small one.

He slipped away from the loudest part of the feast, toward a quiet alcove where roots formed a natural wall.

He closed his eyes.

Focused.

And tried to cast **Exiva**—a search ping so small he barely meant it.

The air shifted.

A ripple of green intent went out from him, tucked under his newly contained baseline like a whispered command instead of a continental scream.

He felt it move.

Felt the world answer.

He opened his eyes—

—and met Queen Lysoria’s gaze from across the grove.

She’d felt it.

Of course she had.

She didn’t look angry.

She didn’t even look surprised.

She just lifted one brow slightly, then turned her head and murmured to a nearby guard.

“Say nothing.”

The guard stiffened. “Your Majesty?”

“He deserves it,” Lysoria said softly.

And that was that.

Arken drifted back toward their guest grove.

The feast behind him still sang.

Ahead, the world was quiet again.

He found Alina’s nook first.

She was asleep already, the kind of sleep that came after wine and bravery. Her face was peaceful. Her hand still lay open like she might be holding his again in a dream.

Jean’s nook was next.

Also asleep. Dead to the world.

Elarion’s nook had the Magus half-sprawled on moss with an empty cup on his chest like a fallen knight of debauchery.

Arken smiled despite himself.

Then he climbed.

Not for drama.

For air.

He moved up Zeno's highest living tree, platforms and branch-bridges rising under his feet until he found the quiet crown where the canopy opened to stars.

He sat there a long time.

Thinking about queens bowing to him.

Thinking about Alina's lips.

Thinking about the terrifying truth that he could *write reality* if he learned the language properly.

The last thought he had before sleep took him was simple:

I'm not drowning anymore. I'm learning how to swim.

He laid back against the warm bark.

Closed his eyes.

And fell asleep.

Not for a night.

For three days straight.

The forest stayed calm.

The Court stayed watchful.

And somewhere under Saltwake's sea-dark, a green-lit presence felt him go quiet again... and waited, patient as tide, for the next time the storm opened its eyes.

Chapter 18 — Three Days Without a Storm

Morning came to Zeno like a soft apology.

Lantern-blossoms dimmed to a gentle glow. Birds tested their voices in cautious trills. High along the living platforms, elves groaned and rolled over as the price of "we like wine" made itself very clear.

Fruit saved them.

Not metaphorical fruit—actual Zeno hangover fruit. Pale orange bulbs were split open, releasing a scent like citrus and cold river water. One bite and the fuzziness behind the eyes thinned. Two, and the pounding skull settled into a tolerable mutter.

Jean chewed his slowly, leaning on a living rail.

“This should be a controlled substance,” he muttered.

On the next beam, Elarion lay flat on his back with an arm over his face, hair loose and dignity questionable.

“This,” he croaked, “is vital magical research into elven vintages. You’re welcome.”

Alina, somehow, was the first to sit up all the way.

Her head ached. Her body protested. But the worst part wasn’t physical.

Arken wasn’t there.

“Have you seen him?” she asked, trying to sound casual and failing.

Jean shook his head. “Not at breakfast.”

“Not at my very dignified crawl to the washbasin,” Elarion added, still horizontal. “He could be walking. Thinking. Brooding on a roof. He does that.”

An hour passed.

He didn’t appear.

Another hour crawled by.

Still no Arken.

The unease thickened until even the forest felt like it was listening.

“He wouldn’t just... leave, right?” Alina asked at last, fingers worrying the edge of her tunic. “Not without saying anything. Not after everything.”

Jean’s frown had a tired edge. “Doesn’t fit him,” he said. “Not now.”

Elarion squinted at the canopy from under his arm. “Guilt makes people do noble, stupid things. Vanishing to ‘protect’ everyone is at the top of that list.”

Alina shook her head. “He’s not stupid.”

“True,” Elarion admitted.

Silence tried to settle. It didn’t quite manage it.

Alina took a breath.

“Okay,” she said. “Before we start ripping up roots, I have to tell you something.”

Jean looked over. “What?”

She swallowed. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

“Last night,” she said, “after the Queen named him Guardian… after the feast… Arken and I talked.”

That alone sharpened both their gazes.

Jean straightened. Elarion rolled onto his side, suddenly more awake.

“I asked him about his wife,” she said.

The air shifted.

“His what?” Jean said.

“Wife?” Elarion echoed. “As in—actually married?”

Alina nodded, staring at her hands. “From where he lived before he came here. He told me once that he was brought here against his will. I… asked if he left anyone behind.”

Jean exhaled through his nose. “And he said?”

“He said he still thinks about her sometimes,” Alina answered quietly. “That he cares. But it feels strange now. Like the feeling stayed, but the place it belongs to is gone.”

Jean’s expression softened despite everything. “That sounds like separation to me,” he said. “Distance does that, even without magic.”

Elarion twitched his fingers. “And then?”

Alina’s cheeks flushed.

“And then I kissed him,” she said.

Elarion sat up so fast he almost slid off the bench. “You—”

“Yes,” she cut in, too quickly. “I did. My choice. I’m not asking you to judge it. I just... thought you should know.”

Jean blinked, trying to brace two facts at once: a wife somewhere out there, and a kiss here in Zeno.

“Did he seem... hurt?” he asked. “Wounded in the wrong way?”

Alina shook her head. “Surprised. Confused. But not angry. Just... thinking. About a lot at once.”

Elarion’s eyes had the glint they got when he smelled a new puzzle.

“Emotional storm, ancient power, responsibility, affection,” he said. “He’s collecting all the fun complications.”

Jean shot him a sharp look. “We’re talking about a person, not your next thesis.”

Alina pressed on before the courage drained out of her.

“He said something else too,” she added. “About how it feels when he... uses magic. He said he recognized it. Like something he used to do back where he came from. Solving problems. Writing... instructions.” She frowned, searching for the word. “He didn’t know how to say it in our language.”

Jean’s frown deepened. “And after that?”

“He went off alone,” Alina said. “I thought he just needed air. Now he’s not here.”

Elarion sighed and swung his legs off the bench.

“All right,” he said. “We can panic later. Now we look.”

Jean pushed off the rail. “I’ll ask the Matrons if they’ve seen him near any major wards.”

“I’m going up,” Alina said.

Jean blinked. “Up?”

She glanced toward Zeno's tallest tree, its crown lost in green light.

"He likes high places," she said simply. "And I can use what I've learned."

Elarion raised his cup in a faint salute. "If you fall, shout something profound on the way down. I'd hate to miss your last words."

She rolled her eyes despite herself and left.

The climb took longer than the fear wanted it to.

Platform to platform. Branch-bridge to branch-bridge. With every level, the noise of the city thinned and the whisper of leaves grew louder. Her legs ached. Her head throbbed with leftover mana-fatigue. She kept going.

At last the canopy opened.

Wind moved freely up here, sliding between leaves. The sky felt startlingly close. The forest spread out below in a deep, endless sea of green.

Alina stepped onto a broad curve of living wood and closed her eyes.

She remembered the soft search-shape a Matron had shown her—a spell built for finding lost children and overconfident apprentices. A whisper, not a shout.

She lifted her hand.

"Show me Arken," she breathed.

The pulse that left her was small and gentle. No pressure spike. No ward-scream. Just a quiet ripple through bark and branch.

For a moment, nothing.

Then the tree under her feet answered—not in words, but with a sure, subtle tug.

She moved around the trunk, fingers brushing rough bark.

And saw him.

Arken lay along a thick branch above, one arm tucked behind his head, the other resting loose on his chest. His clothes were rumpled. His hair had lost the battle against the night breeze. His face, without worry carved into it, looked softer. Younger.

His chest rose and fell in slow, even rhythm.

Alina let out a long, shaking breath.

“There you are,” she whispered.

His aura brushed against her skin—not a crushing flood this time, but a quiet hum wrapped close around him, like a cloak pulled tight.

She didn’t wake him.

She watched him for a few heartbeats more, memorizing the rare peace on his face.

Then she climbed back down to tell the others.

“He’s sleeping,” she said when she reached them. “Very high up. On a branch. Of course.”

The relief hit hard.

Jean sat down heavily on a root-bench. “Of course he is,” he muttered. “Next time I’m chaining him to ground level.”

Elarion actually laughed, a tired, frayed sound. “Highest tree in the forest. Every dangerous thing I’ve known goes for altitude.”

Alina glanced toward the distant crown.

“You know what’s strange?” she said. “He’s only been here a few days. And already people look like they’re about to lose family if he doesn’t show up for a meal.”

She thought of the Matrons “checking ward anchors” with a bit too much frequency. Of elves glancing at the paths he tended to walk. Of the way Queen Lysoria had watched the high branches from the corner of her eye.

“Very noble,” she murmured.

Jean followed her gaze, eyes softer than his voice.

“Healed a lot of them just by existing near them,” he said. “That leaves marks.”

“And the Queen bowed to him in front of everyone,” Elarion added. “That tends to stick, too.”

They waited for him to come down.

He didn’t.

By nightfall, it was clear this wasn’t a short rest.

It was something deeper. The kind of sleep a body takes when it finally stops pretending it isn’t exhausted to its bones.

On the second day, the hangovers had vanished and the worry had settled into something harder and more durable.

Arken still slept.

His aura stayed subdued—no longer crushing the sky, simply humming at a level the forest could live with. Zeno seemed to exhale fully for the first time since he’d arrived.

Queen Lysoria used the quiet.

She summoned Jean, Elarion, and Alina to an inner chamber of the Living Court—a hollow grown inside one of the oldest trees. Its walls were smooth, curved wood etched in faint sigils, lit from within by a patient green glow. Crystals and vine-wrapped tablets grew out of the surface like fruit made of memory.

“This is where we keep what we do not sing about,” Lysoria said. “But it concerns him. And you.”

She glanced at Alina.

“You carry your parents’ thread,” the Queen added. “You have the right to see where it led.”

They read in the glow of floating light-orbs and bioluminescent moss.

First came the old accounts—reluctant writings of what bards preferred to leave in song. Stories of the Verdant Anomaly eight centuries ago: a light-being that made crops bloom while terrifying every ruler simply by existing.

The descriptions were vague about the being itself. The reactions were not.

“Like standing too close to a new sun,” Jean read softly from a slate.

“Like our bones remembered being dust,” Elarion echoed from another, unusually serious.

Most accounts ended the same way:

We joined forces. We tried to erase it. It did not erase us. Then it was gone.

Alina’s fingers traced the carved lines.

“Do you think it’s the same as him?” she asked.

Elarion shook his head slowly. “Same melody. Different singer,” he said. “The old anomaly acted like a force. Arken behaves like a person.”

“Also,” Jean added, “this time the light didn’t appear in the sky. It fell onto a roof and immediately started helping with farm chores.”

That earned him the ghost of a smile from Alina.

Later, Lysoria led them to a lower alcove where the wood cradled bundles of thin, worn pages.

“From Verdant Archives,” she said. “Your parents were among the few allowed to copy these.”

Alina’s breath caught when she saw her father’s writing in the margins—neat notes, careful symbols, comments squeezed into corners like whispers.

The first sigils were familiar: domestic wards, dream-smoothing charms, hearth circles.

Deeper in, the shapes changed.

Lines kinked into stranger angles. Power-knots bent in ways that made the eye want to slide off. Some patterns tugged at Alina’s memory.

“I’ve seen this,” she murmured, tapping one tight knot of ink. “Not on paper. In the air. When Arken’s... presence moves.”

Elarion leaned closer, brows drawing together.

“That’s not purely elven,” he said. “Not demon work. Not Argonian tide-script. It’s like someone took several systems and bent them around a missing idea.”

“Pulse,” Jean said quietly.

They looked up.

“It feels like his aura,” Jean explained. “Not exact. More like people trying to sketch a shadow they don’t understand.”

Alina ran her thumb along the edge of a page.

“So my parents were studying this before he ever arrived here,” she said.

Lysoria inclined her head. “They asked to pursue dangerous history,” she said simply. “I allowed them farther than most.”

“What happened to them?” Alina’s voice was soft, but it struck the room like a thrown stone.

Lysoria did not lie.

“They entered sealed stacks with permission,” she answered. “They did not emerge. There was no sign of struggle. No blood. Only absence. Some doors close without noise.”

The tree around them seemed to hold its breath.

Elarion exhaled. “So either the pattern consumes scholars,” he said, “or it leads somewhere we cannot yet follow.”

Jean’s jaw tightened. “Comforting.”

Alina stared at the notes written in her father’s hand, at sigils her mother might have traced with him at night. Then she thought of Arken sleeping in the highest branches of a foreign forest, humming with a pattern her parents had chased and never caught.

Threads everywhere.

She didn’t know how they connected.

Not yet.

But she could feel they did.

On the third morning, Zeno felt... normal.

Patrol routes returned to their usual paths. The Court sessions resumed. Matrons went back to being quietly terrifying instead of visibly on edge.

Only one thing remained unusual:

The boy with the sky-sized mana pool was still asleep at the top of the world.

Alina checked on him twice, reassured each time by the steady rise and fall of his chest. Jean checked once, grumbling under his breath about reckless magic and necessary rest. Elarion stood at the base of the great tree longer than he admitted, listening to the hum of sealed power the way a musician listens to a note held too long.

Inside Arken's head, nothing was quiet.

This time the dream wasn't about what he'd lost.

It was about how things worked.

Equations floated in the dark behind his eyes—not numbers, not exactly, but shapes of logic. Pieces of spells, fragments of sensation, cause and effect.

He remembered the way Exiva had felt.

Reaching for Alina. Not flooding the world. A narrow, precise line instead of a tidal wave.

He replayed it.

Want: Alina.

Do not: crush anyone. Startle mages. Shake palaces.

Do: find, gently pull, stop.

Not in words.

In structure.

Back where he used to live, he had spent hours building instruction chains like that. Telling mindless things what to do with perfect clarity.

If this is true, do this.

If not, do nothing.

Each time he'd gotten it right there, he'd felt a little click of satisfaction.

Each time he shaped power here, he felt the same click.

He realized, slowly:

He wasn't simply "casting" like a mage repeating memorized forms.

He was writing instructions on top of a power that listened to him.

The realization hit like a clean snap.

His eyes flew open.

Bright sky. Leaves framing the world. Bark under his back.

For a second he lay there, heart racing, mind already running faster.

Then his aura flickered outward in reflex—just once, a small pulse.

The pressure in the high branches rose a notch.

Below, a pair of elves on patrol staggered, then laughed shakily.

"The Guardian wakes," one murmured.

Arken barely registered it.

He rolled, grabbed a branch, and climbed down the tree faster than was remotely wise. He almost slipped twice, saved himself with instinctive grabbings that might have been tiny levitations. By the time he dropped into the guest grove, he was breathing hard more from urgency than exertion.

Jean and Elarion were mid-argument over a ward diagram. Alina was carrying a basket of fruit.

"I need to talk to you," Arken said.

All three looked up.

“Good morning to you too,” Jean said dryly. “You’ve been asleep for three days.”

Alina’s eyes were bright with relief and annoyance. “You scared everyone,” she added.

“Later,” Arken said. His thoughts were too loud. “I think I know what I’m actually doing when I... use this.”

Elarion’s amusement faded into focus. “Go on.”

Arken took a breath.

“Back where I lived before here,” he said, choosing each word carefully, “I used to write very precise instructions. For mindless things. Step by step. ‘If this happens, do this. If it doesn’t, do something else.’ It was... a craft. A way of thinking.”

Jean nodded slowly. “Instruction-chains.”

“Yes,” Arken said. “When I use magic here, it feels the same. I’m not just pushing power and hoping. I’m building those chains in my head—what I want, what I don’t want, how far it should go, what it should ignore.”

Alina tilted her head. “So Exiva worked because... you told it what *not* to do?”

Arken nodded.

“I told it: only her. No thunder across the world. Don’t touch anything else. Just give me a direction. That’s why it didn’t shake the continent.”

Jean rubbed his jaw, thinking.

“So your mind isn’t a pipe the power runs through,” he said. “It’s a table where you write rules first. Then the power flows along them.”

Arken’s shoulders eased a little. “Yes. Exactly. When I’m clear, it obeys. When I’m sloppy, we get earthquakes and exploding sigils.”

Alina winced in sympathy at that memory.

Elarion stepped closer, eyes alight with a dangerous sort of excitement.

“And if you can imagine a chain like that for anything,” he said, “you could, in theory, shape spells no one has ever seen. Not just copy forms. Design behavior.”

Arken swallowed.

“If I can describe it well enough in my head,” he said quietly, “I think I can make it happen.”

Alina looked between them, the weight of what he was saying settling in.

“So we’re not just teaching you magic,” she said. “We’re teaching you a language to talk to the world with.”

Jean let out a slow breath.

“And if you get the sentence wrong,” he said, “the world misbehaves.”

“Which,” Elarion cut in, “is exactly why he is not allowed to keep experimenting alone.”

He lifted a hand and tapped Arken lightly on the forehead.

“From now on,” the Magus said, voice softer but no less intense, “we stop treating you like an ordinary mage. You’re something rarer.”

Arken frowned slightly. “What?”

Elarion’s gaze held a respect he didn’t bother to hide.

“A world-scribe,” he said. “Someone who writes instructions into the fabric of magic itself.”

The words landed with surprising weight.

Alina’s lips curled into a small smile. “Fits,” she murmured.

Jean nodded once, accepting the label even as he feared it.

“Then we make sure,” he said, “you don’t write anything alone that could tear the page.”

Arken looked at all three of them—farmer, scholar, archwizard—standing with him under trees that used to be afraid of him and were now only... watchful.

Something in his chest tightened.

Not with dread.

With something closer to belonging.

“Okay,” he said.

It was a small word.

But for the first time, he wasn’t just surviving the storm inside him.

He was agreeing to learn how to shape it.

Chapter 19 — “What Alina Did While the Storm Trained”

Being named “world-scribe” didn’t slow Arken down.

If anything, it made him worse.

Days blurred into a new rhythm in Zeno: morning calibration with Matrons, midday theory with Elarion, afternoon experiments, evening damage control. The forest grew used to brief flares of pressure, followed by Arken muttering, “Okay, that was too much,” and adjusting his mental equations.

He took the idea of “writing instructions into magic” and ran with it.

Fast.

The Impossible Spells

The first thing he built was a step.

Not a long one.

Just a way to move from one side of the Hollow Ring to the other without walking, the way you’d move a game piece on a board with one thought.

“Short range,” Elarion said firmly. “Inside this circle only. No line-of-sight tricks yet.”

Arken nodded and wrote the rule in his head:

If location = within this ring, then move me there. If not, do nothing. No spill, no area effect, no passengers.

He snapped forward like reality had blinked.

One instant he stood beside Jean.

The next, he was ten paces away, hands out for balance, staring back at where he'd been.

The wards didn't scream. The trees didn't crack. A Matron flinched, then relaxed.

"Again," Jean said hoarsely.

They made him do it until it was boring.

They called it **Step Between**.

The second thing he built was height.

Not wild, reckless flight—just controlled lifting.

"Imagine your body as anchored to an invisible thread," Elarion instructed, pacing below him. "You're not pushing yourself up. You are instructing the world not to let you fall."

Arken liked that.

He wrote the rule:

If I call Sky-thread, then adjust my fall-speed to zero and let me move gently. No sudden drops. Cut power if my heart spikes.

He rose slowly from the ground, never more than a few arm-lengths up. His cloak stirred in a wind that technically wasn't there. For a moment he hovered, amazed.

"Don't grin at the ground," Jean shouted. "Watch where you're going."

They named it **Sky-thread**.

The third thing he built made everyone nervous.

"Mana does not get handed around," Jean said flatly when Arken suggested it. "You can lend power through ritual, but refilling someone else's pool? That's not possible."

"It might be," Arken said. "If the rule is: I give you mine."

Elarion's eyes lit. "Now I'm listening."

They argued for an hour about limits. In the end, Arken framed it like this:

Target: nearby allies only. Effect: loosen fatigue, restore a small portion of their spent power, but only what my vessel can handle without tearing. No infinite well-feeding. Cut off if anyone overloads.

He called it.

A green pulse rolled out from him, soft as breath, touching Jean, Elarion, the three Matrons watching, Alina, and stopping cleanly at the edge of the ward circle.

Everyone inhaled at once like someone had opened a window in their bones.

Jean's eyes widened. "That... shouldn't be possible," he said quietly.

"It's not a refill," Arken said quickly. "More like... unclenching a fist that's been tight too long."

The Matrons, still standing, whispered among themselves.

They named it **Verdant Surge**.

The last thing he built that week was the strangest.

"I can't be the only one who understands this," he said one evening, sitting cross-legged on the moss. "If I get hurt or... vanish again, someone else needs to know how to talk to the power this way."

"You want to... pass your thinking to others?" Elarion asked.

"Not all of it," Arken said. "Just enough for a spell. A way for the magic to *show* someone how much power they need, what shape to hold, what not to do."

Jean stared. "A spell that teaches spells?"

Arken grimaced. "When you say it like that—"

"It's brilliant," Elarion cut in.

They tested it on the smallest, safest thing: a spark-light.

Arken touched Alina's forehead with two fingers and wrote the rule:

If target accepts, then show her this spell's pattern—how much strength to pour; where to stop—and hold her hand through it once. After that, let go.

Alina gasped as a soft green lattice traced itself in her mind—clear lines of “here” and “not here,” a sensation of exactly how full to make the spark and when to stop.

She lifted her hand and called light.

It came on the first try.

No sputter. No overload. Just a clean, steady glow dancing over her palm.

Her eyes shone. “I did it.”

“That’s you,” Arken said. “I just showed you the map.”

They named it **Spell-Echo**.

It exhausted him.

Not in the crushing, three-day coma way—but enough that, by the end of the week, his hands shook if he tried to push further.

“One more,” he started to say.

“No,” Jean and Elarion said together.

He laughed weakly. “Okay. Fine. I’ll sleep like a normal person.”

He meant it.

For once, his body agreed.

Alina’s Quiet War

While Arken learned to tame a sun, Alina was fighting her own quieter battle.

She’d been training since before they ever saw Zeno properly—on dusty roads, in borrowed clearings, at the edge of Saltwake where Argonian scholars turned waves into lesson-boards.

On the way to Zeno, she’d learned basic wards and cantrips—the kind of magic that kept fences from collapsing and lanterns from blowing out. It wasn’t flashy, but the shapes came easier with Arken’s aura humming like a comfort behind her.

When he collapsed for three days in Zeno, she did not rest.

She trained harder.

Under Matron supervision, she learned to shape shields that curved instead of shattering, to ground panic into the roots instead of locking it in her teeth. They used his sleeping presence as a test—pushing her further than was safe for most apprentices because Verdant Surge kept her from completely burning out.

She went to bed late and woke early.

She listened to old elves talk about responsibility like it was a second spine.

She watched Arken sleeping in the high branches and thought, *If he's going to stand in front, then I have to be able to stand next to him without breaking.*

Spell-Echo made it worse.

Better.

Both.

Arken's teaching spell turned the world from “mystery” to “math problem.” Once he used it on her for the first time, sigils stopped being guesswork and started feeling like puzzles she *could* solve if she stared long enough.

She wanted more.

So while he tested Sky-thread and Step Between, she practiced.

While he discussed theory with Elarion, she practiced.

While he pretended not to be exhausted, she ignored her own trembling hands and practiced.

The only one who truly rested, in the end, was Arken.

When Jean said, “Enough,” she kept her mouth shut and trained anyway.

When Matrons suggested breaks, she smiled, nodded, and squeezed more practice into the gaps.

By the time Arken told them “I’ll sleep like a normal person,” she was running on stubbornness and Spell-Echo clarity.

He went to bed.

She sat beside him, mind still humming with sigils, telling herself she'd rest "in a moment" after she finished tracing one last pattern in her head.

At some point, her head slid sideways.

The chair became a bad pillow.

His chest became a better one.

She didn't notice.

The Awkward Morning

Arken dreamed of green lines.

Not guilt. Not death. Just shapes. Instruction chains looping smoothly, no explosions, no screaming wards. It was the nicest sleep he'd had in this world.

He woke to weight.

Soft. Warm.

And a cramp in one arm.

His eyes blinked open to the dim light of a guest chamber—woven walls, curtain of leaves, a bed grown out of the tree itself.

Alina was asleep, sitting on a stool beside the bed, her upper body folded forward against him. Her cheek rested on his chest. Her hair, the same green he'd never gotten used to, spilled over his shirt like a second blanket.

His hand had apparently decided, at some point in the night, that her shoulder was a reasonable thing to hold on to.

"...oh," he whispered.

He lay there for a second, brain doing nothing helpful.

Then he tried to move his hand.

Her eyes cracked open.

They stared at each other from too close, her face still half-dreaming, his expression halfway between panic and apology.

“Morning,” she mumbled, then realized exactly where she was.

Her whole body went stiff.

“I—uh—I was just—” She jolted upright so fast the stool creaked. “You were—I meant to stay awake and then...”

Arken’s ears felt hot. “You don’t have to explain,” he said quickly. “I mean—thank you? For... watching?”

“That sounds worse somehow,” she muttered, pressing a hand over her face.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, trying to find neutral ground.

“How long was I out?” he asked.

“Eight hours,” she said. “Like you said. Everyone was very smug about predicting it.”

Relief loosened something in his chest. “Good. That’s... progress.”

She dropped her hand and really looked at him then.

“You’re the only one who’s rested,” she said.

The words weren’t accusing.

They were just true.

He blinked. “What?”

“I trained the whole way to Zeno,” Alina said. “I trained while you were asleep in the tree. I trained every time you and Elarion buried yourselves in theory.” She shrugged one shoulder, eyes drifting to the floor. “It’s fine. I needed to catch up.”

He frowned. “Catch up to what?”

“To you,” she said simply. “To... all of this. To not being the useless farmer who drags everyone down.”

He stared at her like she'd started speaking a language *he* didn't understand.

"Alina," he said slowly. "You are the reason I didn't die in an alley my first week here. You're the reason I didn't run away when people started fainting from my existence. You are not dragging anyone down."

She gave a small, crooked smile. "Still can't throw a spell like you."

"No one can throw a spell like me," he said. "That's literally the problem."

A laugh ghosted out of her despite herself.

He softened his voice.

"Look, if I'm finally sleeping like a normal person," he said, "you're allowed to be the one who passes out in a chair sometimes. You don't have to keep pace with a... with whatever I am."

"World-scribe," she reminded him.

"Exactly. Terrible job title. Don't compare yourself to that."

She rolled her eyes, but some of the tension left her shoulders.

"All right," she said. "I'll rest when we get back to Yoatha."

He opened his mouth to argue.

She cut him off. "Later. You're already late."

"For what?"

"Jean said if you were still alive in the morning, you had to change clothes and pretend to be respectable before they dragged you to a Council meeting."

He looked down at himself.

Right. Yesterday's shirt. Training scars. Moss.

"Fair," he sighed. "Turn around?"

She did, letting him stand and rummage through the folded set of clothes someone had left on a nearby root. The room filled with the soft sounds of fabric and his quiet grumbling about elf tunic ties.

She was halfway to saying, *You're making it more complicated than it is*, when the door slid open without a knock.

Jean walked in.

Elarion right behind him.

They both froze.

Arken, shirt half over his head, froze too.

Alina, standing between bed and door, hair a mess and face still flushed from the earlier moment, completed the picture.

The silence lasted exactly three heartbeats.

Jean's brow arched very, very slowly.

Elarion's mouth curved in the most infuriatingly knowing smile she had ever seen.

"We can come back," Elarion said mildly. "If you're... busy."

"We are not busy," Alina blurted. "Nothing happened. I was just—he was—I fell asleep and—"

"That sounds like several things," Jean observed.

Arken yanked the shirt down the rest of the way, ears red. "Can we not do this?" he said. "Please?"

Elarion held up both hands. "Far be it from me to stand between young people and perfectly innocent proximity," he said. "We're just here to steal him."

Jean coughed into his fist, still clearly amused. "Queen Lysoria expects you once you're presentable," he said. "There's the small matter of you wanting to leave my safest continent to go apologize to a human king you nearly knocked out without meaning to."

"Right," Arken said, grateful for the change of topic. "That."

Jean's gaze flicked between Arken and Alina one more time, then he turned to go.

"We'll be outside," he said. "Try not to... invent any new spells in the next three minutes."

Elarion winked at Alina on the way out.

She wanted the tree to swallow her whole.

As soon as the door slid shut, she grabbed the nearest excuse.

“I should—go,” she said quickly. “Wash. Breathe. Not be here.”

“Alina—” Arken started.

“I’m fine,” she lied, backing toward the exit. “Meet you with the Queen. Don’t keep royalty waiting.”

She escaped before he could say anything else, heart pounding.

Outside, the morning light felt too bright, the air too sharp. She pressed a hand to her chest, took a slow breath, and reminded herself that she had faced thieves, pulses that shook continents, and an Argonian scholar’s disappointment.

She could survive embarrassment.

Probably.

By the time they reached the Living Court, the awkwardness had settled into something quieter. Alina kept to Arken’s left, Jean to his right, Elarion strolling like this was all a pleasant distraction from his studies.

Queen Lysoria waited on her root-throne, calm as ever.

“You wish to leave us,” she said without preamble.

Arken bowed his head. “Yes, Your Majesty. Zeno has done more for me than I can repay. But I... started all of this in Yoatha. I need to go back. I want to meet the King myself. And apologize.”

“Apologize,” Lysoria repeated, tasting the word. “For shaking his palace. For forcing his Guard to their knees. For frightening a city that never asked to feel your weight.”

“Yes,” Arken said quietly. “And for not being there when it happened. I don’t want to be a rumor in his court. I want him to see that I’m trying to control this. That I’m not... a weapon waiting to go off.”

Lysoria studied him for a long moment.

Alina held her breath.

Jean stood very straight.

Elarion hummed softly, like he was trying to guess the answer before she spoke.

Finally, the Queen nodded.

“Zeno does not keep guardians as prisoners,” she said. “Nor does it send them out blind.”

She rose from the throne, the Court watching in respectful silence.

“You will have my blessing to return to Yoatha,” she said. “Jean will accompany you. Elarion, if he can bear to leave his trees, may go as well. You will speak to the human king not as a supplicant, but as one who understands the damage he has caused and the protection he can offer.”

Her gaze sharpened.

“And you will remember, Arken: you are not going back alone.”

He glanced at Alina.

She met his eyes, still pink around the edges, still tired, but standing exactly where she’d chosen to stand from the beginning—next to him, not behind.

“No,” he agreed. “I’m not.”

The Queen inclined her head once.

“Then prepare,” she said. “Yoatha waits for you. Whether it knows it or not.”

Chapter 20 — The Sky Road to Yoatha

Leaving Zeno should have been slow.

By tradition, you took a caravan down the great roots, crossed by river, then sailed under the watch of half a dozen wards and six times as many forms. The forest liked to keep track of who left it.

Arken looked at the world of careful routes and, very politely, ignored all of it.

They stood on one of the outer platforms of Zeno, where the living wood thinned and the wind tasted of distance. Below them, the canopy rolled away in every direction like an endless green sea.

Jean tugged at the strap of his satchel. “We can take a river barge to the coast, then a ship,” he said. “It’ll be a week, maybe two, depending on currents and whether anyone tries to kill you on the way.”

“A week?” Elarion groaned. “Do you know how many research notes I could misfile in a week?”

Alina snorted. “You already do that in a day.”

Arken wasn’t really listening.

He was squinting at the horizon.

“Three continents,” he murmured. “We’re here. Yoatha’s there. It’s just... distance.”

Jean frowned. “Distance is what kills people walking across it.”

Arken flexed his fingers.

Sky-thread had become almost comfortable now—a thread he could tug on without shaking the world. He could float himself for minutes at a time, adjust his speed, land without breaking his ankles. Elarion had been making him practice getting *bored* with it.

He kept thinking: *If I can hold one, I can hold more.*

He should have thought: *My mana is infinite. My body is not.*

What he actually thought was:

Everyone holds their own weight when they fly, because they have to. What if they didn’t?

He took a breath and shaped the rule in his head.

Target: these three people.

Effect: keep their bodies aloft at fixed height, follow my path, match my speed.

Source: my mana only.

Limit: no sudden drops, no pulling from their pools, cut power if hearts spike.

He reached out, palm up.

“Give me your hands,” he said.

Alina didn’t hesitate.

Jean did, but only for a second.

Elarion grinned. “If we die, at least it’ll be interesting,” he said, and took Arken’s wrist instead.

Arken closed his eyes and spoke the trigger softly, more thought than word.

Sky-thread — share.

The world shifted.

Weight unhooked from their feet.

Their cloaks fluttered in a wind that seemed to come from all directions at once. The wood under their boots stopped feeling like something they were *standing* on and more like something they’d chosen to be near.

Alina gasped as her stomach did a brave, terrified flip. Jean sucked in a breath and did not swear, which for him was a sign of extreme alarm.

“Don’t look down yet,” Arken warned.

Then he stepped forward.

Into nothing.

The platform dropped away beneath them. Zeno’s highest roots slid down and back, like someone had pulled the tree out from under their feet. The four of them moved out into the open air, suspended on invisible lines.

Alina clamped down on Arken’s hand like a drowning woman.

“Don’t let go,” she hissed.

“I literally wrote that into the spell,” he said through a tight, giddy laugh. “I’d have to argue with the world to drop you.”

Elarion’s hair whipped back in the wind. His eyes were alight.

“Marvelous,” he breathed. “Jean?”

Jean’s jaw was clenched. “I will have thoughts about this later,” he said. “For now, I am focusing on not throwing up on the Guardian of Zeno while flying over her forest.”

Below them, the canopy turned into a rolling carpet. The wind grew stronger, wrapping around them like a fast river. Arken adjusted the height—fifty meters above the treetops, enough to see, not enough to die immediately if something went wrong.

He pushed forward.

Speed built.

Air stung their eyes. The forest blurred under them into a deep green rush, interrupted by lighter clearings, silver rivers, distant glints of lakes like dropped mirrors.

Zeno fell away behind them.

The sky opened.

They didn’t realize how unprecedented it was until they checked their own breathing.

Three minutes into the flight, Elarion closed his eyes, tested his inner pool, and blinked them open again in shock.

“I am not spending mana,” he said.

“Me neither,” Jean said, startled. “This feels like a sustained levitation ritual but my reserves are untouched.”

Alina risked a glance inward the way the Matrons had taught her. She expected to find her little pool fluttering, strained.

It wasn’t.

It felt... rested. Carried.

“Arken,” she said, “this is all you.”

He had the decency to look sheepish even as he guided them higher.

“I, uh... set it that way,” he admitted. “I forgot that sharing is usually the only way to make this fair.”

“Forgot?” Jean repeated, scandalized.

“In my head, it’s just... numbers,” Arken said. “I told it: *use my mana, not theirs*, and it obeyed. I didn’t think what that means anywhere else.”

“What it means,” Elarion said, laughing into the wind, “is that we are flying across half a continent off **one** person’s power without passing out after ten breaths. This has never been seen.”

“And if you drop unconscious mid-air?” Jean asked.

Arken winced. “Then we fall.”

“Wonderful. Add that to your equations next time.”

“I will!” Arken said. “This is a prototype! A beta!”

They stared at him.

“A what?” Alina asked.

“Never mind,” he muttered.

He pushed again.

The air around them thickened, forming a sort of invisible flow that cradled their bodies and cut the worst of the wind from their faces. They weren’t riding a gale so much as sliding along a path Arken carved ahead of them—an unseen road through the sky.

Behind them, in Zeno, ward-keepers watched their trail with wide eyes as their instruments ticked and hissed, recording a moving spike that stayed contained, focused, and impossibly generous.

“You realize we’ll reach Yoatha in hours instead of weeks,” Elarion said after a while.

“Three,” Arken guessed, feeling the pace. “If I keep this speed.”

Jean sighed. “Of course. Why would we ever do anything the ordinary way again.”

They flew over the emerald border where forest gave way to hills and scattered woods. Villages became occasional patches of color. A wide ribbon of river flashed silver beneath them.

At some point, the initial terror wore off enough for everyone to remember they had mouths.

Elarion started it.

“So,” he said, as if they were sitting in a tavern and not hung on threads of magic above the world, “since we’re using your impossible flight to cross vast distances, perhaps it’s time to discuss what we learned while you were napping like a felled treant.”

Arken winced. “Right. The… Verdant thing?”

Jean adjusted his grip on the invisible nothing under his feet. “The Verdant Anomaly,” he said. “Eight centuries ago, a being of green light appeared, improved far too many things, terrified every leader alive, and then left when everyone tried to erase it.”

Alina shot him a look. “That’s the blunt version.”

“It’s also the accurate one.”

They took turns filling him in.

Old bard fragments.

Scholars’ notes that sounded like fear dressed as curiosity.

Descriptions of mana pressure “like standing too close to a new sun.”

The way every account agreed on one thing: it could have ended them and didn’t.

“And the sigils,” Alina added softly. “My parents were copying patterns in Verdant Archives. Strange ones. Wards that looked… like your aura moves.”

Arken’s fingers tightened around hers, not enough to break the spell, just enough to anchor her.

“They disappeared,” she said. “No blood. No sign of a fight. Just gone.”

The wind carried the words away behind them.

“I’m sorry,” Arken said quietly.

“I know,” she replied. It wasn’t about blame. Just connection.

Elarion spoke more gently than usual.

“We don’t know if that old anomaly and you are tied,” he said. “But the pattern is familiar. The forest felt it before it ever saw you. The runes under Yoatha are aligned to something that looks like you.”

“Runes under Yoatha?” Arken echoed.

Jean nodded. “The city is a circle. More than that, it’s a shape. The scholars think the whole place is sitting on a design drawn by someone who understood this pulse. They never figured out how to unlock it. Les—” He caught himself. “Your Alina’s parents were closer than most.”

“Everything you do seems to wake pieces of that pattern up,” Elarion added. “Step Between, Verdant Surge... your Exiva. The city responds. The runes stir. They know you.”

“Feels like they’re... waiting,” Alina murmured.

Arken stared ahead.

Forest gave way to plains below them now—fields and roads, tiny moving dots that were people who would never know four lives just crossed their sky on a road of invisible magic.

“Okay,” he said eventually. “So there was something before me. And my... whatever this is... rhymes with it.”

He let that sit.

They deserved something back.

He took a breath.

“You asked who I was before,” he said. “I kept saying ‘I was brought here against my will’ because that was... easier than the whole thing.”

Jean made a noncommittal sound. “We noticed.”

Alina was quiet, listening.

“My world had no mana,” Arken said. “At least not like this. No spells. No runes. Just... machines. Metal, glass, light trapped in boxes. We built systems to do our work

for us. I worked with those. I wrote instructions, told the dead things how to act, how to respond.”

“Your ‘instruction chains,’” Elarion said.

“Yeah.” He smiled faintly. “I liked it. Solving problems. Making broken things behave. When I wasn’t doing that, I played games. Stories you could move around inside. Worlds that pretended to be endless if you had enough time.”

His smile faded.

“I was married,” he said. “You know that part now.”

Alina’s fingers twitched in his. “You don’t have to—”

“I do,” he said. “You asked honestly. You deserve the rest.”

The wind rushed past.

“I kept saying I was brought here against my will,” he went on, “and that’s true in a way. I didn’t sign a paper that said ‘send me to the magic world, please.’ But I did... wear myself out. Completely. I kept pushing. Work late. Play late. Be there for her late. ‘I’ll rest later.’”

He huffed out a breath that wasn’t quite a laugh.

“Later never comes if you keep moving it,” he said. “One night I went to sleep. I didn’t know it was the last one. There was no pain, no drama. Just... too much accumulated exhaustion, and my body finally deciding, ‘We’re done.’”

Jean’s gaze shifted, something complicated in his eyes. “So you died in your sleep,” he said softly.

“Yeah.”

“How did it feel?” Alina whispered.

“Like being erased gently,” Arken said, staring at the horizon. “First there was nothing. No body, no sound, no ‘me’ the way I’d always felt it. Then there were waves. Not water—just... movement. Then a feeling. Green. Aware. Like everything got distilled down to one color and one thought.”

Elarion was utterly still.

“And then?” he asked.

“I floated,” Arken said. “Above a city I didn’t understand. Your city. Pulled to a rooftop I’d never seen. I didn’t know what ‘roof’ meant, but I knew I belonged there. The air felt different. The light folded. Next thing I remember, I was on your roof, naked, human, and panicking because my voice didn’t match anyone else’s.”

Alina let out a shaky breath. “I thought you were another rune-crafter who’d broken his mind,” she admitted.

“I probably was,” he said.

The joke was small, but it took some weight off the words.

“You didn’t choose this, then,” Jean said. “You didn’t bargain with anything, or call any power.”

“No,” Arken said. “If something chose me, I don’t remember the conversation.”

“Whoever did a marvellous job,” Elarion murmured. “Terrible communication, excellent results.”

Alina glanced at Arken’s profile.

“So when you say ‘brought here against my will’...” she said.

“I mean,” Arken replied, “I went to sleep thinking I’d wake up next to someone I loved, in a world I understood. I woke up on a roof in a different sky as green light turned into skin. Nobody asked me, ‘Do you want this?’ first. And I still don’t know if there’s a way back. Or if there should be.”

Silence stretched between them, filled with wind and clouds.

“Do you miss it?” Alina asked.

He thought about screens. About cheap food. About late-night laughter. About an entire life that ended mid-sentence.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sometimes it hits hard. Then I remember that if I were still there, I’d just keep grinding myself down until something else broke.”

He looked at her, then at Jean and Elarion.

“And now I have this,” he said. “A world I don’t understand, people who keep not running away, and a terrifying amount of responsibility stapled to my soul. I didn’t choose it. But I don’t hate that I got another chance.”

The wind caught Alina’s hair, whipping it back.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said simply.

Jean cleared his throat. “For the record,” he added, “I’m very annoyed that some unknown force dropped a walking spell-theory catastrophe into my life. But I’d be more annoyed if you weren’t here to fix what you broke.”

Elarion smiled like a man who’d found the best research topic of his life.

“You are a gift to magic and a danger to architecture,” he said. “I would be offended if you’d gone anywhere else.”

Arken’s chest felt tight in a way that had nothing to do with mana.

“Thank you,” he said.

The hours slid by on threads of light.

Below them, the landscape changed again.

Fields thickened. Roads converged like veins toward a single point. The air carried the faintest hint of brine.

“Yoatha’s trade lines,” Jean said, nodding downward. “We’re close.”

Alina leaned forward, eyes searching the horizon.

There.

At first it was just a line. Then a smudge. Then the outline of walls and towers and sails—a vast coastal city stretched along the curve of the bay, docks like fingers reaching into the water, markets like a vivid bruise of color at its center.

Home.

Arken felt something shift in the air as they drew nearer.

The runes under Yoatha stirred like a sleeper turning over.

“Feel that?” Elarion asked quietly.

“I’d have to be dead not to,” Jean muttered.

Alina shivered. “It knows he’s back,” she whispered.

Arken adjusted their descent.

“Okay,” he said. “No crashing into palaces. No surprise pulses. We arrive on our feet like civilized people.”

“Ambitious,” Jean said.

“Shut up and let me focus.”

He rewrote Sky-thread on the fly—lowering their speed, softening their landing instructions, making sure that when they touched stone, the grip of his spell let go gently.

They dropped toward the outer district, toward familiar roofs and streets and the heartbeat of The Crackerjack’s distant noise.

Three hours after leaving Zeno, they drifted down onto a quiet side street near the eastern gate of Yoatha as lightly as if they were stepping off a stair.

No mana drained from anyone but Arken.

No one had ever done that before.

He released the spell.

Gravity claimed them again.

Alina staggered once, more from the sudden return of weight than from fear.

“We’re here,” she said, half to him, half to herself.

Yoatha breathed around them—arguments in alleys, distant bells, the smell of fish and spice and stone baked in the sun.

Arken looked up at a sky he’d shaken once without meaning to, then down at streets where he’d almost died before he even knew their names.

“I owe this place,” he said quietly.

Jean nodded toward the inner rings.

“Then let’s start paying,” he replied. “The King is waiting.”

Chapter 21 — The Lady of the Deep

The King already knew.

By the time Arken’s boots touched Yoatha’s stone, crystal readers in the palace were screaming quietly in their frames. Detection wards, half-blind since the first Pulse, flared just enough to whisper to the King and Queen:

He’s back.

They didn’t move yet.

They didn’t send riders or guards.

They just waited, because people who shake continents tend to arrive whether you hurry them or not.

Arken didn’t go to them first anyway.

Jean had a different priority.

Saltwake looked the same and not at all.

The fish quarter was awake in full—nets stretched on racks, gulls wheeling and arguing overhead, the air thick with brine, tar, and the sharp tang of cut-scaleflesh. Argonian voices rolled through the streets in clacks and hisses, layered with Common where bartering demanded it.

They walked once they passed Yoatha’s inner gates. After flying a continent, the feel of stone underfoot felt heavier than it should have.

“Palace later,” Jean said. “If I don’t see my mother first, she’ll swim across to Zeno just to drag my tail back.”

Alina smiled despite her nerves. The closer they came to Saltwake’s docks, the tighter something wound in her chest. The sea felt... awake. Watching.

Arken felt it too.

A low hum under his ribs, like someone plucking a string inside his chest in rhythm with the waves.

“Does the ocean always sound this loud?” he muttered.

Jean frowned. “What do you mean? The boats? The gulls?”

“No,” Arken said. “The... underneath.”

Elarion turned his head, listening with mage-sense instead of ears. His eyes narrowed.

“Interesting,” he murmured. “File that under ‘problems for ten minutes from now.’”

Jean’s family house lay just off the main dock-line—a sturdy stone-and-wood structure with nets hanging neatly on one side and carved wave-patterns along the doorframe. It smelled faintly of smoke, salt, and old spell-ink.

As they turned into the lane, Jean’s shoulders relaxed just a little.

“Almost there,” he said. “She’s probably still—”

Arken stopped.

Then he folded.

There was no warning shout, no dramatic stagger. One heartbeat he was walking beside Alina, the next his knees hit stone hard enough to scrape.

“Arken?” Alina grabbed his arm.

His eyes went wide.

Not in pain.

In recognition of something she couldn’t see.

His hand flew to his chest.

He sucked in a breath that never finished.

The hum under his ribs cut off.

“Arken!” Jean dropped beside him, fingers going to his throat, then his chest. No pulse. No beat. Just a deep, terrifying silence.

At the same moment, the ocean growled.

It wasn’t the usual crash of waves. The entire harbor rumbled like some giant had rolled over beneath it. Water slapped against piers in sudden, choppy bursts. Nets swung. Boats groaned against their moorings.

Fisher-Argonians shouted, dropping ropes and crates to grab for balance.

“Could it be from the flight?” Jean snapped, panic making his accent sharper. “Did you burn him out—”

“No,” Elarion said sharply. “He hasn’t dipped his vessel that low in days. This isn’t exhaustion. This is... resonance.”

Arken exhaled once, hard.

Then nothing.

His body went limp.

For a breath, he lay there like any young man who’d simply passed out.

Then he rose.

Not under his own power.

Green light, faint and thin as mist, wrapped around his chest and shoulders and lifted him up into the air like invisible hands. His head lolled, eyes closed. His feet cleared the cobblestones by a handspan, then two.

“Absolutely not,” Alina hissed, lunging to grab his wrist.

She caught it.

For a heartbeat, she held him.

Then whatever held him pulled.

Her heels scraped along the stone as her grip was dragged forward.

“Jean!” she gasped.

Jean grabbed Arken's other arm. Elarion threw an anchoring sigil onto the ground, lines of blue-white light fanning out under them, trying to glue Arken's body in place.

For a moment, it worked.

Then the tug from beyond the harbor increased, slow and impossible. The anchoring sigil strained, lines warping. Elarion grit his teeth, pouring more precision into it.

"This shouldn't be possible," he ground out. "Nothing overrides this kind of—"

The sigil snapped like a rope.

The backlash threw him to one knee.

Arken drifted forward, dragging Alina and Jean with him.

"Let go!" Jean shouted.

Alina's fingers tightened.

"No."

The street ended in a low wall overlooking the docks. Beyond it, the ocean boiled.

Not a poetic boil.

Real.

Bubbles the size of cart-wheels burst on the surface out past the piers. Water heaved up and down in great, heaving breaths. Argonians swore and scrambled back from the edges. Bells clanged as watchtowers started ringing warnings.

"Everyone back!" someone shouted in Common. "Away from the seawall!"

Alina didn't move.

Her boots hit the low stone barrier. Jean threw one arm around her waist to keep her from going over. Together they held on to Arken, who hung in the air between them and the sea like a human offering.

The ocean swelled.

Then something broke the surface.

At first it was only a shadow.

Then a neck.

Long. Thick. Black-green scales glistening with brine and streaked with pale scar-lines. It rose higher and higher, shedding sheets of water. A head followed, massive and reptilian, with a long jaw, nostrils flaring, and eyes like twin lanterns of molten emerald.

It was a plesiosaur, the old kind sailors carved into tavern walls after too much rum. A story-shape. A myth.

Only this one was real, and its mere presence pressed on the air like a second gravity.

Mana rolled off it in waves.

Saltwake felt it first.

Argonian fishers dropped to their knees, gills fluttering, eyes wide. Those who still had the strength clutched at amulets, at the dock rails, at one another. A few backed away blindly, hissing prayers. Others froze, stunned by a terror that felt exactly like the first Pulse had, only wetter.

Alina's stomach flipped in raw recognition.

This pressure.

This vertigo.

This *scale*.

It was Arken's aura, before he'd learned to tuck it in.

But it wasn't coming from him.

It was coming from the thing in the sea.

The plesiosaur's head angled toward them. Toward Arken.

Towards the thin, patient stream of green light tethering his chest to the depths.

“Jean,” Elarion said quietly, even as his hands sketched abortive wards in the air. “You remember the disturbance you felt in the water weeks ago.”

Jean swallowed. “The green… gas. The thing that moved like it was thinking.”

Elarion nodded. “This is it grown up.”

The creature exhaled.

The breath came out as a blast of cool, damp wind that smelled of deep water and something older than rivers. The bubbles around it calmed, forming a wide circle of comparatively still sea beneath its looming head.

Arken drifted closer to the seawall.

Alina dug her heels into the stone until they hurt.

“Don’t take him,” she whispered through gritted teeth. “Please.”

The plesiosaur’s gaze slid over her like she was a detail on the shore.

Then it focused entirely on Arken.

For a heartbeat, everything went silent.

No gulls.

No bells.

No shouting.

Just the sound of the sea breathing.

Green light thickened around Arken’s limbs, his chest, his throat. For a horrifying instant, it looked like he was being wrapped for sinking.

Then the light pulsed once.

Alina felt, rather than heard, a thud beneath her palm where it rested against his arm.

His heart.

It beat.

Once.

Twice.

Then settled into a steady rhythm—too slow for someone awake, strong enough for someone deeply sleeping.

“His heart—” Jean choked. “It’s back.”

The plesiosaur closed its eyes as if in relief.

Then its outline... wavered.

Scales blurred into mist. Edges lost their shape. The massive neck and head collapsed inward, shrinking, folding into themselves like someone was twisting the image into a tighter knot.

Water rose around the collapsing bulk, then fell away as the mass compressed and brightened.

The green light didn’t vanish.

It condensed.

When the glare faded, a figure stood on the surface of the water where the plesiosaur’s chest would have been, as calmly as if she were standing on a polished floor.

She was tall, with skin the color of wet stone kissed by green light. Her hair fell in long, heavy waves the shade of deep-sea kelp, threaded with pale shells and faintly glowing sigil-strands. Her eyes were the same molten emerald as the creature’s, slit-pupiled like an Argonian’s but set in a more human face.

Scaled patterns traced her arms and collarbones like jewelry. A dress of layered, translucent fabric clung to her like water, shifting between blue and green with each movement.

Mana still poured off her in steady waves, but where the plesiosaur had felt like a storm, she felt like the tide—immense, inevitable, strangely gentle unless pushed.

Arken’s body lowered, floating toward the seawall now instead of the deeps, guided by the same threads. Alina and Jean were pulled along until he hovered just above the stone.

The woman walked forward.

Each step left a brief, glowing sigil on the waves that faded as soon as she passed.

When she reached the seawall, she stopped.

She bowed.

Not to the city.

To Arken.

Her voice, when she spoke, rolled like distant surf.

“At last,” she said, in perfect, clear Common. “My Master returns.”

The word hit the dock like a dropped anchor.

Alina’s fingers tightened involuntarily.

Jean stared. “Master—?”

Elarion’s eyes were very narrow now. “Not bonded today,” he murmured. “This is old. Very old.”

The woman lifted her gaze.

Up close, the weight of her stare was like standing at the edge of a trench in the sea—you knew there was depth you couldn’t see, and it made your bones want to back away.

“I am Tidebound Seris,” she said, almost formally. “Guardian of the Deep Pulse. Ward of Saltwake. I have watched these waters since before your kind wrote laws on stone.”

She looked at Arken’s unconscious face with a complicated softening.

“And I have been waiting for *him* longer than any of you have been alive.”

Alina swallowed. “You... know him?”

“In essence,” Seris said. “Not this body. Not this name. But the Pulse is the same. The pattern is the same. He is the one who stirred the sea when the sky first cracked with green, long before your centuries of shame and forgetting.”

A door slammed open behind them.

“Jean?!”

His mother’s voice cut through the shock.

She rushed out of the house and skidded to a halt on the lane, gills flaring, eyes taking in too many things at once—the monster-gone-woman, the floating boy, the glow.

“Mama, get back!” Jean shouted.

She didn’t.

She stared past him at Seris.

Something like recognition blurred her features.

“You,” she breathed.

Seris inclined her head, a small nod of respect.

“Maritha of the Tide-Scripts,” she said. “You swim stubborn as ever.”

Alina blinked. *They know each other?*

Jean’s jaw dropped. “You... know the enormous sea monster that just tried to steal my friend?”

Maritha—slight, scarred, with the wiry strength of a woman who had swum more years than most had walked—walked past her son and laid one hand on the seawall.

“She did not try to steal him,” she said calmly. “If she had, you would not be holding him at all.”

The water witch’s gaze flicked to Arken. Then to Alina, who still refused to let go.

“You can ease your grip, child,” Maritha said gently. “His heart beats. He sleeps. He is not drowning.”

Alina loosened her fingers by a fraction.

Maritha looked back at Seris.

“You told me I would see this in my lifetime,” she said. “I called you a liar.”

Seris's lips curved, just barely. "You argued with the tide," she replied. "It was entertaining."

Jean made a helpless noise. "Mother. Explanations. Now."

Maritha exhaled, long and slow, like someone paying off a debt.

"All right," she said. "Inside. Before half of Saltwake comes to kneel or run."

She snapped her fingers.

Water rose in a low, gentle crest under Arken's body, lifting him enough that Jean and Alina could guide him down from the invisible grip and onto a hastily conjured stretcher of hardened foam and sigil-light. He was heavier than he looked, but his breathing stayed slow and steady.

Seris walked beside them on the water, then stepped onto the dock. Saltwater dripped from the edges of her dress, vanishing into steam before it hit the boards.

Every Argonian eye on the docks followed them.

Some knelt.

Some hid.

Some simply stared at Seris with the haunted awe of people seeing a story their grandparents used to whisper standing in front of them.

Maritha's front room was too small for what it now contained.

Nets hung in neat loops along one wall. Shelves of driftwood held sealed jars of ink, rolled tide-charts, and worn spell-boards etched with water sigils. A kettle hissed quietly on the hearth.

Arken lay on a pallet in the center, looking almost peaceful.

Alina sat at his side.

Jean took the chair nearest the door like he was guarding it.

Elarion leaned against the wall with his arms folded, eyes sharp, saying nothing.

Seris stood near the far wall, hands clasped loosely in front of her, as if she were in a council chamber instead of a fisher-witch's home. The room seemed a little too full of her, like the sea had decided to fit into a bottle and more or less succeeded.

Maritha busied herself with the kettle long enough to think.

Then she turned to face them all.

"You felt the first Pulse," she began without preamble. "The whole world did, if it had enough sense in its veins. You know the stories of the light-being eight hundred years ago—half miracle, half terror. What you don't know," she nodded toward Seris, "is that the sea remembers more than your books."

Seris inclined her head, granting the point.

"When I was young," Maritha went on, "I swam too deep. Too far out. I felt something in the dark—a current that thought back when I touched it with magic. Not a beast. Not a god. Just... will, tied to the water. That was my first meeting with her."

She jerked her chin at Seris.

"I have watched over these coasts since before your kings' line was clean," Seris said. "I was bound here by a choice your kind has forgotten—a pact with the first Pulse-bearer. I guard. I wait. When the pattern returns, I answer."

Jean frowned. "Pact with the first— You mean the one from the war? The Anomaly they tried to erase?"

Seris's gaze went distant, remembering.

"He came to the sea when they turned on him," she said. "He could have unmade them all, but he did not. He asked only that the world survive his leaving—that something watch the borders he had opened. I agreed. He poured a drop of his Pulse into the deep. I became its keeper."

She looked at Arken again, her voice softening.

"When this one fell into your sky, that drop woke screaming."

Maritha nodded. "The disturbance Jean felt in the water weeks ago," she said. "That was Seris stirring for the first time in... a long time. When Arken sent his Pulse across the continents, it called every old thing that remembered the first light. She's one of them."

Alina swallowed. “And today?”

“Today,” Seris said, “his heart remembered what it once did here.”

She met Alina’s gaze, unblinking.

“His Pulse reached for the deep. The deep reached back. His mortal shell is young; it does not yet know how to carry all that weight. So it stopped for a moment while we... aligned.”

“Aligned,” Jean repeated weakly. “So his heart stopping was... what, a handshake?”

“A very old kind of greeting,” Seris agreed.

Alina’s hands tightened in Arken’s blanket. “He looked dead.”

“He was not,” Seris said. “The thread between us has been stretched for lifetimes. Today it snapped taut. There is no tearing it now.”

She straightened, the room seeming to shrink again around her.

“I am Tidebound Seris,” she repeated, more formally. “From this day, I follow my Master until death—his, or the world’s. I will not turn on him. I will not abandon him. I will drown those who try to chain him as they tried before.”

The oath settled in the air like heavy mist.

Elarion let out a low whistle. “That,” he said, “is going to make every diplomat on the planet extremely nervous.”

Maritha shot him a look. “Good.”

Jean rubbed his face, trying to massage order into the chaos.

“So he didn’t almost get dragged to the bottom,” he said slowly. “He got... a bodyguard.”

“Not a bodyguard,” Seris corrected. “A ward. A tide that moves where he does. I am not tame. But I am his.”

Alina glanced down at Arken.

His chest rose and fell steadily. His face, even slack with sleep, looked less strained than it had in weeks.

“How long will he be like this?” she asked quietly.

Maritha stepped closer, resting a webbed hand briefly against his forehead, then his chest. Her eyes unfocused, reading flows Alina couldn’t see.

“Not long,” she said. “This time it is normal sleep. His heart is strong. His Pulse is... calmer than I expected, given what just happened.”

She smiled faintly, lines at the corners of her mouth deepening.

“He’ll wake hungry and confused,” she said. “Like any man who’s just gained a sea at his back.”

Alina exhaled, some of the last leftover terror finally loosening.

“So,” Jean said faintly, dropping his hand, “to summarize: my friend did not die. He instead finished a centuries-old pact he didn’t know existed, gained an ancient sea ward who sees him as her Master, and made half of Saltwake almost pass out... again.”

“Yes,” Maritha said. “That is the short version.”

Elarion pushed off the wall, eyes gleaming with the kind of excitement that made sensible people nervous.

“And the King and Queen,” he added, “who already suspect our boy here is tied to an old world-breaking anomaly, just felt all of that from their nice safe palace.”

He smiled, slow and sharp.

“Their day just got very interesting.”

Alina reached down and took Arken’s hand in both of hers, thumb brushing his knuckles.

“Then we’ll be ready when he wakes,” she said softly.

Beside her, the Lady of the Deep watched her Master sleep, silent and patient as the tide.

Chapter 22 — Audience With A King, Sea Monster, and Two Very Confused Girls

Arken woke up to someone staring at him like he was treasure.

Not metaphorical treasure.

Actual *dragon-hoard* energy.

His eyes blinked open to the low ceiling of Maritha's front room, nets and tide-charts hanging where they'd always hung. Light slanted in through the round window, catching dust motes and the slow bob of glass floats.

Alina's hand was wrapped around his.

Jean was asleep in a chair against the wall, head tipped back, mouth slightly open.

Elarion was not asleep; he was sprawled on a bench reading three tablets at once.

And Tidebound Seris was sitting cross-legged on the floor at the foot of his pallet, chin resting on her palms, watching his face like it was her favorite story.

“...morning?” he croaked.

Alina jerked awake. “You’re up,” she breathed, squeezing his hand.

“Unfortunately,” Jean mumbled, cracking one eye open. “Now we all have to explain things to a human monarch.”

Elarion didn’t look up. “Correction: *you* have to explain. I’m just here to add dramatic detail and correct your mistakes.”

Seris smiled.

Seeing her up close while conscious was different than seeing her in flashes through panic.

Her presence felt like standing next to a cliff-side ocean at high tide: powerful, cold, but not unkind if you respected the edge. Her hair, dark green with glints of pale sigils, fell loose down her back. She’d traded translucent sea-drapes for a more practical long coat that looked like it was woven from kelp and dark leather—still damp around the edges, still too elegant for a fisher’s house.

“You slept well,” she said, voice a low roll. “Your heart holds the Pulse more cleanly now.”

Arken’s brain tried to remember if he was supposed to bow to a tide goddess.

“I, uh. Thanks?” he said.

Seris tilted her head, pleased by... something. "You may thank me later," she said. "When the world stops trying to tear your heart out of rhythm."

Alina released his hand a little too quickly, suddenly aware that he was awake and she was still holding on.

"So," Arken said carefully, glancing between them all. "Did I... die again? Because last time I died, it was much quieter."

Jean sat up fully, rubbing his face. "No," he said. "You had what our new friend calls an 'old greeting' with the ocean and gave me a second heart attack out of pure courtesy."

Elarion closed one tablet with a snap. "Short version: giant plesiosaur rising from the deep, you floating like a sacrificial lantern, tide turning into a woman who now calls you 'Master.'" He smiled faintly. "You're welcome for the successful summary."

Arken stared at Seris. "The... sea monster was you?"

She looked faintly offended. "I am not a 'monster.' I am a guardian of the Deep Pulse. The shape I used was efficient."

"It was horrifying," Jean muttered.

Seris's eyes flicked to him, amused. "You survived," she said. "You always do. It is one of your more endearing traits."

Alina cleared her throat.

"So now you have a... sea ward," she said slowly. "Who has apparently decided she belongs to you."

Seris corrected her without missing a beat.

"Not *belongs*," she said. "*Follows*. He is my Master. I am his tide."

The way she said it made it worse somehow.

Arken's ears went hot. "Okay, let's... not say that too loudly near anyone who likes gossip."

"Oh," Seris said, as if tasting a new concept. "You dislike public acknowledgment of our bond."

"I dislike public *phrasing* that makes it sound like I signed up for a cult," he said.

Her eyes gleamed.

“When you are ready,” she murmured, “we will discuss what you did or did not sign up for.”

Alina’s grip on the blanket tightened.

Maritha chose that moment to walk in, carrying a tray of cups and what smelled like salted tea.

“Good,” she said briskly. “You’re awake. Drink. Eat. Then we go to the palace before the King sends the entire Guard to knock on my door and track sea footprints through my house.”

Jean accepted a cup. “He already knows, right?”

Maritha snorted. “The moment your friend’s aura scraped the sky again, the palace lit up like a festival. Then the sea boiled. Then Seris stood up for a better look. If Renard and Elainia *don’t* know, I want their warding budget.”

Elarion nodded thoughtfully. “So, yes.”

Arken tried to sit up. His body protested, but not in the “you just rewrote your soul” way. More like he’d run a long distance and finally stopped lying about being tired.

Alina steadied him without comment.

Seris watched her hand on his shoulder with polite, assessing interest.

“So,” Arken said carefully. “We go to the King. We explain... everything.”

Jean sighed. “Most of everything,” he said. “Maybe not the part where you’re technically a reincarnated anomaly from a mana-less world. One existential crisis at a time.”

“Agreed,” Elarion said. “We’ll give them the version that doesn’t make their advisors spontaneously combust.”

Maritha nodded. “Tell them what matters: he caused the pulses, he’s learning to control them, he didn’t choose this, and if anyone tries to chain him like the old stories, the sea will chew their fleets into driftwood.”

Seris smiled, shark-bright. “Gladly.”

Alina gave Arken a look. “Try not to apologize for existing,” she said. “Just for the earthquakes.”

He managed a weak smile. “No promises, but I’ll aim for ‘socially acceptable level of guilt.’”

They walked to the palace.

Mostly.

Guards met them at the inner ring—men and women in polished breastplates etched with the city’s wave-and-rune emblem, spears and staves at the ready. They bowed when they saw Jean and Elarion. They stared when they saw Seris.

One guard, a young woman with sea-gray eyes, opened her mouth.

Seris turned her head just enough to let her gaze brush over the guards.

A ripple of shivers passed through the line.

“Relax,” Seris said. “I only drown people who deserve it.”

“That’s... comforting,” the captain said weakly.

Arken pinched the bridge of his nose. “She’s joking,” he said.

“I am not joking,” Seris added.

Alina coughed into her fist to hide a laugh.

They were escorted through the wide streets of the inner district, under banners bearing the royal crest. Citizens watched from balconies and market stalls, murmuring as the odd procession passed: an Argonian scholar, a human farmer with green hair, an elven archwizard, a boy whose aura made the air taste like mint and ozone, and a sea-lady who walked like she owned every harbor in the world.

“On a scale from one to ‘demon war,’ how bad is this?” Arken whispered.

Jean thought about it. “Depends how honest you are,” he said. “And how much the Queen likes your face.”

“The Queen likes pretty things,” Elarion added conversationally. “And power. You have both. You’ll be fine.”

“That doesn’t help,” Arken muttered.

They climbed the wide palace steps, flanked by statues of past kings and queens. The main hall opened into a long throne room with high, arched windows that let in the sea-light. Columns of pale stone rose to a painted ceiling, and the floor itself was inlaid with a sprawling circular design—a simplified echo of the city’s hidden rune.

At the far end, on a raised dais, sat the King and Queen of Yoatha.

Renard Vaelor looked exactly like someone who had been born knowing all eyes were on him. Tall, dark hair touched with gold at the temples, a face that had been carved with patience and then sharpened by responsibility. His eyes were storm-blue and, right now, tired but keen.

Beside him, Queen Elainia was... a problem.

Beauty was power in Yoathallis unless you couldn’t back it up. Elainia could, and everyone in the room knew it. Hair like black silk poured over one shoulder, skin the warm brown of sunbaked clay, eyes the same pale green as old sea glass. Her gown shifted color between deep sapphire and forest-green as she moved, sigils stitched into the hem in silver thread.

If Lysoria was the forest’s sharp grace, Elainia was the city’s polished blade.

The King’s Guard lined the walls, hands on hilts or staves.

At the foot of the dais, a steward announced them.

“Jean of Saltwake, scholar of the Tide-Script Academy. Archmage Elarion of Yoatha. Alina of Hearthweave. Arken... of unknown crest. Tidebound Seris, Guardian of the Deep.”

That last name sent a visible ripple through the room.

Every Argonian present went very, very still.

Renard’s fingers tightened on the arm of his throne.

Elainia’s eyes sharpened, weighing, measuring.

“Step forward,” the King said.

They did.

Arken felt the weight of the room press in—mana, history, expectation. He resisted the urge to flinch or crack a joke about job interviews.

He bowed.

The others followed.

“Your Majesties,” Jean said, straightening. “Thank you for seeing us.”

Renard’s gaze slid to Arken and did not move.

“We felt you before we saw you,” he said. “Again.”

Arken swallowed. “Sorry about that,” he said automatically.

Elainia’s mouth curved.

“Apologizing before we finish our accusation,” she said. “Efficient.”

“Just trying to get ahead of the panic,” Arken replied before his brain caught up.

The Queen blinked, then actually laughed—a quiet, surprised sound.

Renard’s expression twitched, like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to be amused.

“Start at the beginning,” he said. “The first Pulse. Yoatha on its knees. Then the forest. Then the sea.” His gaze flicked briefly to Seris. “We would like the version that does not leave out anything that might later try to eat our city.”

Elarion coughed politely. “In that case, Your Majesty, you may want to sit very firmly.”

“We are already seated,” Elainia said. “Speak.”

Jean took a breath and began.

He spoke of the first Pulse—the day mana screamed across the continents, the King and Queen fainting in their chamber, mages gagging on pressure they had no words for. He spoke of Hearthweave, of a strange boy on a farmer’s roof, of street thieves and a frozen moment in an alley.

Elarion took over when Zeno entered the story, painting the Queen a picture of rune-cities and world-scribes, of a forest that had flinched at Arken's arrival and now grew greener under his presence.

Alina quietly filled in the small things no one else could: Arken's confusion, his efforts on the farm, the way he ran himself ragged trying not to break anything else.

Seris, when the story reached the sea, did not wait to be asked.

"And then," she said in that low, even voice, "his heart called to the deep. I answered."

She described rising from the trench, feeling the Pulse again after centuries. How his mortal shell faltered under the weight of reconnected power. How she stabilized his heart and completed a pact made with the last bearer of the Verdant Pulse.

"We are bound," she finished simply. "As I was bound to the last. I will follow him until his end. I will guard his back, his flanks, his sea-borders. Any fleet that comes for him will break on me first."

The room was so quiet Arken could hear his own heartbeat.

Elainia sat back slowly.

"So," she said. "Our city's hidden rune responds to him. The forest likes him enough not to kill him. A sea guardian older than our crown swears herself to his service. And our King," she glanced at Renard, "once fainted because this young man wanted to know where his friend was."

A few of the Guards looked deeply uncomfortable.

Renard exhaled through his nose. "We were not prepared for that day," he said dryly.

Arken cleared his throat.

"Your Majesties," he said, forcing his voice not to tremble. "I came here to say—I'm sorry. For the pulses. For the fear. I didn't mean to... drag your city into my learning curve. I didn't choose this. But I'm not going to pretend it didn't happen."

He looked up, meeting the King's eyes.

"I'm trying to learn how not to hurt anyone," he said. "Or anything. That's why Zeno trained me. That's why Jean asked you to let them bring me there. I'm not a... weapon someone pointed at you on purpose. I'm a guy who died very tired and woke up with a sun in his chest."

Elarion winced a little. “We were not going to mention the dying part.”

Renard blinked. “*Died?*”

Arken mentally kicked himself. “Right. That. Uh.”

Elainia leaned forward. “Explain,” she said.

So he did.

Not every detail. Not names. Not Earth. But enough.

That he came from a place with no spells and lots of machines. That he exhausted himself, went to sleep, and didn’t wake up there. That he opened his eyes here instead, as light above their city, then as a human on a stranger’s roof.

“Someone put me here,” he said simply. “I don’t know who. Or why. But I know I got another chance and almost blew it by breaking your wards.”

Silence held for a long moment.

Then Elainia spoke.

“Tell me,” she said, “do you want our throne?”

The question landed like a thrown knife.

Arken choked. “What? No! Absolutely not.”

“Do you want our lands?” Renard asked, voice steady. “Our armies? Our neighbors’ crowns?”

“No,” Arken said, horrified. “I want—” He stopped, honest words catching in his throat. “I want to not be the reason people wake up terrified anymore. I want to figure out how this works. I want my friends to be safe. That’s it.”

Elainia studied him.

“Do you intend to bend our laws to your will?” she asked. “Erase our courts? Rewrite our world because you can?”

He shook his head. “No. If anything, I want your laws to help keep *me* in check.”

Something eased in the line of Renard’s shoulders.

“All right,” the King said quietly. “We can work with that.”

He stood.

The court tensed automatically.

Renard descended the steps from the dais, stopping a few paces in front of Arken. Up close, his presence was more human and less myth—lines of tiredness at the corners of his eyes, the faint stiffness of a man who’d been sitting in one place too long.

He extended his right hand.

Arken stared at it.

“I do not kneel to you,” Renard said. “Not because I think you are unworthy, but because I am King here and this is my duty. I also will not pretend you are a normal citizen. So. Let us start as two men who share a city and would prefer it not shatter.”

After a beat, Arken took his hand.

It felt like shaking hands with a storm that had decided, at least for today, not to rain.

Elainia rose from her throne and came down as well.

Up close, her beauty was even more weaponized. This was a woman who could tell you she’d ruined your plans and make you feel flattered about it.

She circled Arken once, slow, assessing.

Seris shifted very slightly, putting herself at his back.

Alina did the same, stepping instinctively to his side.

The Queen’s mouth twitched.

“I see,” she murmured. “A forest archmage, a sea guardian, a farmer with a frighteningly loyal spine, and an Argonian scholar who looks like he hasn’t slept in a week. Quite a little constellation you’ve built.”

“Built is a strong word,” Arken said. “I sort of... tripped into them.”

“The best bonds start that way,” Elainia replied.

She lifted her hand—then, unexpectedly, reached past him to flick a leaf out of his hair.

“You had tree in your head,” she said. “Ruins the drama.”

He blinked. “Thank you?”

“Don’t mention it.” She stepped back, voice turning formal again. “Arken of... wherever the gods dropped you. We acknowledge the danger you pose and the efforts you have made to lessen it. We accept your apology for the disruption you’ve caused to Yoatha.”

She paused.

“And,” she added, “we accept that the world seems determined to make you our problem. So we will do what Yoatha does best: profit from it.”

Arken blinked. “Profit?”

Renard’s lips curved. “In alliances. In strength. In having a Guardian who can, on a very good day, keep the sky from falling on us.”

“One condition,” Elainia said, holding up a finger. “You do not test new, large-scale spells inside the city walls without telling us first.”

“Ever again,” Renard added.

“That’s fair,” Arken said quickly. “Very fair. Extremely fair.”

“And,” Elainia continued, eyes gleaming, “you will allow our scholars access to some of your instruction patterns. With supervision. And veto power from your current handlers.”

Elarion perked up. “I accept on his behalf,” he said.

“You cannot accept on my behalf,” Arken protested.

“I absolutely can,” Elarion said. “You’ll thank me when we have ten more people who can talk to the Pulse without exploding.”

Seris shifted closer to Arken, her shoulder almost brushing his.

“When he is teaching,” she said calmly, “I will be there.”

Elainia’s gaze flicked between Alina and Seris, then back to Arken.

“So,” she said, tone turning amused. “Tell me, Arken. The guardian of the deep follows your every step. The farmer will cheerfully punch thieves and time itself for you. Elven and Argonian scholars trip over themselves to study you. Are you collecting champions, or just oblivious to the way everyone looks at you?”

Arken made a strangled noise.

Jean coughed violently, trying not to laugh.

Alina turned roughly the color of a ripe tomato.

Seris smiled, a slow, claiming thing.

“He is not collecting,” she said. “He is being collected.”

“By *who* is the question,” Elainia murmured, clearly delighted.

Arken’s brain blue-screened.

“I— that’s not— we’re here about earthquakes,” he said helplessly.

Renard actually laughed this time, a low, genuine sound.

“Well,” he said. “If you cause no more pulses for a time, we shall consider this audience a success.”

He inclined his head—not a bow, but something close.

“Go,” he said. “Rest. Do not leave the city without telling us. And if the world decides to shake itself again, try to send a note.”

“We’ll work on a... low-impact signal,” Arken said weakly.

Elainia gave Seris a last, measuring look.

“You and I will speak later,” she said.

Seris’s eyes glinted. “I look forward to it, Queen of Stone.”

The court was dismissed.

They emerged into the palace courtyard in a loose cluster, adrenaline slowly draining.

Jean exhaled. “That went... better than expected.”

“Nobody fainted,” Elarion said. “We’re improving.”

Alina walked at Arken’s side, her steps a little quicker than usual.

He glanced at her. “You okay?”

She nodded once. “Just... processing that our king basically asked if you were starting a harem in front of the entire court.”

He choked. “Please never call it that.”

Seris, walking on his other side, leaned in just enough for her words to be for him and Alina alone.

“If multiple hearts wish to anchor to one tide,” she said thoughtfully, “it is only natural.”

Alina nearly tripped.

“Stop saying things like that,” she muttered.

“Why?” Seris asked. “It is true.”

Arken scrubbed a hand over his face.

“I’m begging both of you,” he said, “let’s focus on not destroying the city before we argue about... anchoring.”

Elarion drifted back toward them, catching only the tail of that.

“Oh good,” he said blandly. “We’re already using nautical metaphors for feelings. This won’t be complicated at all.”

Jean groaned. “I miss when my biggest problem was getting a discount on spell-ink.”

They walked out into Yoatha’s sunlit streets—one very tired world-scribe, a farmer whose heart was trying to be brave, a scholar with too many worries, an archmage with too many ideas...

...and a Lady of the Deep, already quietly staking her claim on the boy the world kept handing impossible things to.

Chapter 27 — Farm, Tide, and Soft War

Alina and Arken said goodbye to Jean and Elarion at the palace steps.

“We’ll pick up training tomorrow,” Jean said. “Assuming you don’t spontaneously ascend or explode overnight.”

“I’d prefer neither,” Arken replied.

Elarion clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t invent any new world-laws without me,” he said. “I get jealous.”

Then they were gone—Jean back toward Saltwake to let his mother yell at hug him, Elarion toward the upper city where the Academy kept a room perpetually cluttered in his honor.

Which left three:

A farmer, a world-scribe, and a sea goddess pretending she was just someone casually walking three inches off the ground.

Hearthweave, Party of Three

The walk back to Alina’s farm felt almost normal at first.

Sun low. Cracked roads. The comfortable squeak of overworked cart wheels somewhere behind them. Arken knew the turns now—the shortcut past the old well, the lane that cut behind the tannery to avoid the worst smells.

Seris took it all in like she was touring a foreign temple.

“So this is where you fell,” she said at last.

Arken glanced up. From here you could just see the edge of Alina’s roof over the fields. “Yeah,” he said. “First landing point for cosmic delivery.”

Alina snorted. “My roof is not a cosmic delivery point. It’s where we dry laundry.”

Seris considered that. “He arrived naked on your laundry,” she said. “That is an interesting omen.”

“That is not how I’d phrase it,” Arken muttered.

They reached the gate. Alina hesitated, hand on the latch.

“Okay,” she said, mostly to herself. “New rule. Tide guardians are allowed. But no flooding my fields to ‘bless’ them.”

Seris tilted her head. “A controlled tide can enrich soil—”

“Seris,” Arken said gently. “We really, really don’t want to drown the turnips.”

She sighed like someone being denied a perfectly reasonable ritual. “Very well. I will limit myself to the well and the bath.”

Alina blinked. “The what?”

Seris gave her a serene, innocent look. “Your Master should not bathe alone with his heart so precious. The sea is the safest place for him.”

Alina’s hand tightened on the gate.

“Yeah, he’s not bathing *with you*,” she said. “The bath is a one-person activity.”

“Two would be more effective,” Seris said, perfectly serious.

Arken opened his mouth, shut it again, and decided to pretend he was a ghost.

Alina drew herself up. “Listen,” she said. “He nearly died in my alley, slept on my roof, and broke my fence before you even *noticed* him. I get first right of panic and first right of—of bath boundaries.”

Seris regarded her in silence.

Then, unexpectedly, she smiled—not mocking; sharp, but not unkind.

“You are small and loud,” she said. “And you did not let go of him even when the tide pulled. I respect that.” Her eyes gleamed. “I will not share the bath. For now.”

Arken made a strangled noise. “Can we go inside before my soul evaporates from embarrassment?”

They did.

For a while, coexistence looked like... logistics.

Seris did not sleep in a bed. She preferred water.

The first night, she turned Alina's small irrigation pond into something between a shrine and a hot spring—sigils glowing faintly along the stone edges, water rippling even without wind. She slipped into it without a sound, leaving only green-lit waves lapping at the sides.

“You good there?” Arken asked from the edge, arms folded.

Seris’s eyes opened just above the surface, bright and amused. “I have lived in trenches deeper than your city is wide,” she said. “This puddle is quaint. But it is near you. That matters.”

Alina watched from the porch, arms crossed, blanket around her shoulders.

“So she’s... staying,” she said.

Arken looked back at her. “Bound until death, apparently. I don’t... know how to send her home. Or if I should.”

Alina exhaled. “Then we make it work,” she decided. “But if she floods the pantry, she sleeps in the ocean.”

“I heard that,” Seris murmured from the pond.

Days settled into a strange new rhythm.

In the mornings, Arken helped with chores like before—hauling buckets, checking fences, feeding animals. Only now, buckets occasionally floated to his hands on thin threads of invisible force, and fences repaired themselves a bit when he touched them.

Alina pretended not to be impressed and then got mad at a broom that wouldn’t sweep itself.

“Your magic does dishes,” she grumbled one night. “Why doesn’t it do *this*?”

“I’ll work on a plate spell,” Arken promised. “Version one will probably send them into orbit, though.”

Seris made herself “useful” in her own way.

She controlled rainfall over the fields with casual precision, sending soft blankets of water over dry rows and letting storms break a step to the side when they got too rough. Fish suddenly became very easy to catch in the river, practically volunteering into nets.

Alina had to admit, grudgingly, that having a tide goddess on call was not *entirely* awful.

Until Seris leaned in the doorway one evening as Alina kneaded bread and said, conversationally:

“You and he fit well together.”

Alina froze. “What?”

“You move around each other like people who have decided not to be alone,” Seris went on. “Your pulses sync. It is... harmonious.”

Alina’s hands went very still in the dough. “Are you... mad about that?”

Seris shook her head. “No. I like harmony. It makes guarding easier.” Her eyes gleamed. “I will simply add myself to it.”

Alina dropped the dough.

“Add— That’s not how people *work*,” she spluttered.

“In the sea,” Seris said calmly, “schools move as one. Pods hunt as one. It is efficient.”

“People are not fish.”

“Some of you are close.”

Arken chose that exact moment to walk in with an armful of kindling.

He stopped dead at the sight of Alina flushed and flustered, Seris looking profoundly innocent.

“I am not emotionally equipped for whatever this is,” he said. “Do we need a chart? I can do charts.”

They lasted three days before Alina banned relationship metaphors at the dinner table.

At night, they got used to each other's presence.

Sometimes Arken slept on the roof again, under the stars, because it still felt like the closest thing to "home" his soul remembered. Alina would drag a blanket up once in a while and sit near him, not quite touching, trading stories about bad harvest seasons and worse employers.

Sometimes Seris would rise from the pond in her human shape and sit on the fence, hair dripping trails of light, listening to them as if she were studying a new current.

"You miss your other world," she said once, very quietly, when Alina went inside.

Arken swallowed. "Sometimes."

"Do you want to go back?" she asked.

He stared at the sky.

"If I went back," he said, "I'd leave all of this behind. Her. Jean. Elarion. Zeno. You. The mess I made. The chances to fix it."

Seris watched him.

"I do not think the Pulse brought you here to abandon you again," she said. "Nor to let you abandon yourself."

He huffed a breath. "You say that like it's obvious."

"In the deep, nothing survives alone," Seris replied. "You keep trying. It will drown you faster than any tide."

He filed that away under: *Things Ancient Sea Guardians Say That Sound Like Therapy*.

Verdant Archives, Round Two

With the King and Queen's wary blessing, Arken returned to the Verdant Archives.

This time, he didn't get lost.

A pair of palace scribes met him at the gate each morning and walked with him through the Scholar Quarter—past rune-shops, ink sellers, and lecture courtyards—to the high, many-windowed building that had once been Alina's parents' second home.

The head Archivist, a severe human woman named Master Irielle with ink-stained fingers and a gaze that weighed your soul, met him at the threshold the first day.

“You are not to touch the sealed stacks without supervision,” she said. “You are not to cast inside this building. You are not to ‘see what happens’ to any of my shelves.”

“Understood,” Arken said, trying not to look like someone whose existence had already set off three cataclysms.

She studied him a moment longer.

“Alina’s parents were good people,” she said. “They believed the Pulse was more than a story. If you are what they thought they might find... do not waste their research on flippant experiments.”

The words hit him harder than any magical pressure.

“I won’t,” he said quietly.

She nodded once and waved him in.

The weeks that followed were... dense.

He started in the safe sections—accounts of Yoatha’s founding, treatises on city-wards, essays arguing about whether the “Verdant Anomaly” had been a god, a mage, or the fever dream of too many bards.

Patterns emerged.

Yoatha’s streets weren’t just convenient; they were deliberate. The way major roads curved, how districts hooked into each other, where fountains and towers sat—it all traced parts of a larger design.

Arken recognized it the way a programmer recognizes an architecture chart.

Subroutines, he thought, tracing a finger along a map. *Each district doing one thing. Feeding something bigger.*

He found Alina’s father’s notes in a slim, worn notebook tucked into an anonymous box—small annotations in the margins of dense rune-diagrams, excited observations about “Pulse resonance” and “missing core.”

Here, a question circled three times:

What key shape would talk to all of them at once?

Arken stared at those words for a long time.

Every afternoon, he walked the city after reading—feet following roads his fingers had traced hours earlier. Through The Crackerjack, past Guild Row, along the edges of the noble district. He listened.

With his aura tucked in tight, his new listening spells didn't stir the wards much. He wrote instructions like:

If you feel a matching pattern, hum. Don't act. Don't unlock. Just tell me you're there.

The stone answered.

Softly, but it answered.

The Market streets thrummed faintly when he passed. The Scholar Quarter tugged at his attention near certain intersections as if some buried line wanted to be completed. Even the humble outer rings hummed when his steps lined up with hidden curves.

Yoatha is a rune, he thought, the old conclusion settling deeper now. *And I'm walking on its sentence.*

He didn't unlock anything.

Not yet.

But every day the map in his head filled in a little more.

Chapter 23 — In the City of Red

Far away, under a different sky, the city of Red pulsed with its own kind of magic.

Rias—capital of the Demon Nation—never really slept. Its streets were lit by floating ember-lamps and neon sigils. Casinos spilled light and music into narrow alleys. The red-light district lived up to its name in every way: lanterns, hair dyes, silk curtains, and eyes rimmed in kohl.

Demons thrived on excess the way plants thrived on sun.

Gambling dens. Night markets. Secret spell fights in basements where bets were paid in souls owed and favors promised.

And in one of the quieter upper rooms of a high-end club, a spy knelt before her queen.

She was demon enough to fit right in in Yoatha—horns filed short, eyes adjusted to pass for exotic human, glamour sliding over her features like a second skin. She had spent weeks in the coastal city listening, watching, slipping between taverns and markets like smoke.

Now the glamour was off.

Her horns curled back properly. Her eyes glowed a subtle crimson. The air around her smelled faintly of brimstone and expensive perfume.

“My Queen,” she said.

On the chaise by the window, reclining like sin given a crown, sat Queen Seraith of Rias.

She was demon beauty distilled—hair a cascade of wine-red curls, skin a deep onyx glossed with subtle luminescence, eyes bright molten gold. She wore power like jewelry: thin chains of enchanted metal looping her wrists, rings that hummed softly, a choker etched in moving sigils.

She swirled something dark and sparkling in a glass and did not look up immediately.

“Report,” she said at last.

The spy swallowed. “The rumors from Yoatha are... true, Your Majesty.”

“Which rumors?” Seraith asked lazily. “They generate so many. The one about the King’s mistress being a disguised dragon? The Crackerjack selling cursed dice? Do not waste my evening with tavern stories.”

“The one,” the spy said carefully, “about the boy who shook three continents just by existing.”

That got Seraith’s attention.

She sat up slowly.

“Go on,” she said.

“He is human,” the spy said. “By body, at least. Plain, if you look once. Unbearable if you look twice. His mana...” She shivered, remembering. “It is like standing next to a volcano that thinks. No pool. No edges. When he cast a search spell looking for a single girl, our wards here flickered.”

Seraith’s eyes narrowed.

“You felt him here,” she said. “Across the sea.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“And Yoatha still stands,” Seraith mused. “Interesting.”

The spy nodded quickly. “He has been named Guardian by the elves of Zeno. The forest archmage treats him like a walking theorem. The human King and Queen did not execute him; they spoke with him like... like something they are afraid to anger and desperate not to lose.”

“And the sea?” Seraith asked. “Our contacts in Saltwake babbled about waves.”

“A guardian rose,” the spy said. “Old. Tied to the Pulse itself. It took the shape of a beast, then a woman. She pledged herself to him. I did not dare get closer.”

Seraith’s smile sharpened.

“A boy with infinite mana,” she said. “A forest backing him. A sea ward bound to him. And he is... what? Kind? Guilty? Trying very hard not to break things?”

“Yes,” the spy said. “He apologizes. A lot.”

Seraith laughed, low and delighted.

“Oh, that is *perfect*,” she murmured. “Power that dwarfs ours, housed in someone who will flinch before he strikes.”

Her smile faded into calculation.

“And Yoatha intends to keep him,” she said. “Of course. Humans cling to luck when they get it, even if it burns their fingers.”

“What shall we do, my Queen?” the spy asked softly. “Some of the Lords are already talking. They say we must have him—or kill him—before the elves or humans use him against us.”

Seraith turned her gaze toward the window, where the city of Red glowed like a wound in the night.

“We will not kill him,” she said. “Not yet. There is no sport in breaking a toy you haven’t played with.”

She set her glass down and steepled her fingers.

“Send word to our agents in Yoatha,” she ordered. “I want eyes on his habits. Who he eats with. Who he smiles at. Who he would bleed for.”

The spy bowed her head. “The farmer girl,” she offered. “Alina of Hearthweave. And a sea creature wearing a woman’s face. They are... close.”

“Even better,” Seraith said. “Anchors.”

She rose, silk whispering around her, and walked to a wall hung with a vast map of the three continents—pins and threads marking alliances, grudges, trade lines, old wars.

Her nails tapped lightly against the human coast, over Yoatha’s mark.

“The last time the Pulse walked the world, our ancestors were too busy being afraid of gods to think clearly,” she said. “We are not so timid.”

She glanced back over her shoulder, eyes bright.

“We will not rush,” she said. “We will watch. We will learn what he wants. And then...”

Her smile was slow and dangerous.

“...we will offer it. For a price.”

The spy shivered.

“Yes, my Queen.”

As she left, the music from the floors below rose—laughter and dice, clinking glasses and whispered deals. The city of Red burned on, hungry.

And somewhere far away, on a quiet farm under Yoatha’s sky, Arken fell asleep on a roof with Alina snoring softly in the room below, Seris humming to herself in the pond, and no idea that demons had just written his name on their most ambitious board.

Chapter 29 — Date Day Disaster (Yoatha Edition)

It started because Alina snapped.

In a very polite, Hearthweave way.

“You’re going to burn out,” she said, slamming a plate of food down in front of Arken hard enough to rattle the table. “Library, chores, spell-experiments, ‘accidental’ rune listening. You haven’t had one day just to be… here.”

“I’m fine,” Arken lied, chewing.

“You almost fell asleep into your soup yesterday,” she said. “You tried to stir it with a quill.”

Seris, lounging in a chair she’d appropriated as her “land throne,” tilted her head.

“His heart rate has increased twelve times in the last three days while at rest,” she observed. “This is not optimal.”

“See?” Alina pointed a spoon at him. “Even the ocean thinks you need a break.”

“You sound like I’m a leaky boat,” he protested.

Seris’s eyes gleamed. “You are a… precious vessel,” she said. “One we should maintain.”

Alina made a face. “You’re not helping.”

She turned back to Arken, resolving hardening.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “No training, no rune-hunting, no ‘accidental’ pulses. We go into Yoatha and just be people for a day. Walk, eat, look around. Like normal citizens.”

Arken blinked. “That sounds dangerously like a date.”

Alina’s heart did a stupid jump. “If you’d… like it to be.”

He opened his mouth.

Seris spoke first.

“I will accompany you,” she said serenely.

Alina's stomach dropped. "Why?"

"Because where he goes, the tide follows," Seris replied. "Also, I wish to see more of this city you keep almost breaking."

"That makes it less of a date and more of a... party," Arken muttered.

Alina forced a smile that had way too many teeth. "Fine. A... group outing."

She was absolutely going to treat it like a date anyway.

Morning — The Verdant Rise (and Passive Aggressive Brilliance)

They started at the **Verdant Rise** because Arken insisted on "just one quick stop" at the Archives.

Master Irielle allowed exactly three other people in with him on the condition that they "do not breathe too loudly near the relic shelves."

Alina walked close to Arken, fingers brushing his sleeve every time he slowed to look at a diagram.

"You've been here every day," she murmured. "Feels weird seeing it with you instead of waiting at home."

He smiled sideways at her. "Feels less lonely with you actually in the picture," he said.

Her heart absolutely did not melt. (It did.)

Seris, drifting behind them, looked up at the vaulted ceiling, unimpressed.

"In the deep, knowledge is carried in currents," she said quietly. "You feel it when you swim through the right trench. This is... very organized drowning."

Irielle glanced at her with a look that could calcify water.

"These shelves hold the work of thousands of minds," the Archivist said. "Try not to insult my life's purpose in front of them."

Seris bowed, surprisingly respectful. "Your drowning is beautiful," she amended.

Arken choked.

Alina elbowed him. “Don’t laugh,” she hissed.

He tried very hard not to.

They ended up at a table with a city map spread between them, annotated to hell with tiny notes in three different hands—Archivists, Alina’s father, and Arken’s recent additions.

Alina leaned over his shoulder to read. Her hair brushed his cheek.

He was suddenly, painfully aware of the warmth of her against his back.

“You found Hearthweave’s node,” she said, finger tracing a faint mark. “You didn’t tell me.”

“I wanted to be sure before I got your hopes up,” he said. “Look—see that curve? It lines up with the old well and the crossroads where you sell produce. It’s part of the life-feed back into the main rune.”

She beamed, proud and bright.

“My farm is part of a world-scale spell,” she said. “Mom would’ve loved that.”

Seris leaned in on the other side, so close her hair brushed his other shoulder, smelling like salt and cold wind.

“Your first landing was not random,” she said. “The Pulse likes that place. That means *you* like that place.”

The way she said it made it sound uncomfortably intimate.

Alina’s smile flickered. “It means he likes my land,” she said. “Not necessarily me.”

Seris’s mouth curved. “The land is not what he keeps looking at.”

Arken made the tactical decision to bury his face in the map.

“Okay,” he said too loudly. “That’s enough rune talk for the morning. Next stop: less probability of public emotional implosion.”

Irielle, passing by, muttered, “Too late,” under her breath.

Midday — The Crackerjack (Tostones, Territory, and Trouble)

They hit **The Crackerjack** at noon, when the market was at full power.

Smells punched them first—fried food, grilled fish, fruit, sweat, spices. Fabric canopies snapped overhead, every color fighting for attention. Sellers shouted over each other. Somewhere, a bard was butchering a perfectly good song.

Arken relaxed despite himself. This place was loud, messy, alive. Nobody here cared if you were a world-scribe as long as you didn't block their stall.

Alina grabbed his wrist. “We’re getting tostones first,” she said. “Non-negotiable.”

They wound through the crowd to a stall that smelled like home—oil, plantains, and that special red-white slaw sauce combo.

The stall-owner, a round old woman with forearms like battering rams, squinted at them.

“You again,” she told Alina. “And the boy with too much mana. And your new... water problem.”

Seris actually bowed. “Your food is powerful,” she said. “I respect it.”

The old woman snorted. “Flatterer. Three plates?”

“Four,” Alina said. “I’m hungry.”

They ended up squeezed onto a low bench, tostones piled high on rough plates, slaw bright against golden fritters.

Arken took one bite and almost groaned. “Okay, yeah,” he said. “If the Pulse brought me here just for these, I forgive it a little.”

Alina laughed, wiping sauce from the corner of his mouth with her thumb without thinking.

They both froze.

Her thumb lingered half a heartbeat too long.

Seris watched, eyes narrowing a fraction.

Then she leaned forward, took a tostone, and calmly put it to Arken's lips.

"Open," she said.

He stared. "That's not necessary, I have hands—"

"You are already using them," she pointed out, nodding at the sauce on his fingers.

"Allow the tide to assist."

Alina bristled.

"I can feed him just fine," she snapped.

Seris's gaze slid to her, amused. "You can," she agreed. "You are good at keeping him alive. I am good at making sure no one steals him."

"He's not an object," Alina shot back. "He's not *stealable*."

Arken attempted to eat and disappear at the same time.

"Pretty sure I still have a say in this," he muttered around fried plantain.

"Do you?" Seris purred.

Alina made a strangled sound.

The stall-owner watched all of this with the resigned patience of someone who had seen too many young people do very stupid things.

"You should marry the farmer," she told Arken flatly. "The water one will drown any children who misbehave."

Seris's eyes glittered. "Children would swim well with my guidance," she said.

Alina choked on her drink.

"That is a *later* problem," Arken sputtered, face on fire. "Like... much later. Multiple crises later."

They ate the rest of lunch in a kind of tense truce—the kind where both sides occasionally tried to hand Arken things at the same time and their fingers "accidentally" bumped a little too hard.

Afternoon — Guild Row & The Gilded Ledger

After food, Arken suggested **Guild Row**.

“I want to see how this place works with... less apocalypse in the air,” he said.

The **Gilded Ledger** was exactly as loud as legend said.

Contracts slapped onto boards every few minutes, adventurers shuffled between tables, someone was arguing about hazard pay at the bar, and a lute player in the corner was butchering another song.

Alina stuck close to Arken, very aware of how many eyes turned toward them.

“Is that the mana-quake kid?”

“No way, he’s too plain.”

“He’s with a farmer and—by the abyss, is that a sea spirit in human form?”

“Five gold says he could solo the Kraken contract.”

Arken hunched his shoulders. “I hate this,” he muttered.

Seris stood taller, clearly enjoying the attention.

“Their fear is... respectful,” she said. “It means they understand at least a fraction of what you are.”

“We’re trying to keep him from being worshipped, remember?” Alina hissed. “Or hunted. Or both.”

They ended up at the quest board anyway.

Most of the contracts were mundane: pest clearing, escort duty, missing shipments, “please help my cousin stop summoning minor demons for fun,” etc.

One small posting in the corner caught Alina’s eye:

Seeking: party with good hearts, bad sense of self-preservation.

Payment: not in coin. In secrets.

Location: see the kid with too many books.

Elarion had clearly been here.

Arken snorted. “We are *not* taking that,” he said. “I know that handwriting.”

Alina smiled. “One day.”

They found a table upstairs away from the worst of the noise. From there, they could look down at the bustling hall below.

“Can you imagine you in a normal party?” Alina asked, chin on her hand. “Filling out forms. Taking goblin-nest contracts. Splitting loot.”

Arken tried to picture it—small dungeon runs, arguing about who got which sword, worrying about rent instead of runes.

“It sounds… nice,” he admitted. “Simple.”

Seris considered the hall. “If you joined a party here, they would either hide behind you or worship you,” she said. “Neither is simple. Or nice.”

Alina glanced at him. “What *do* you want?” she asked softly. “For you, not for the city, or the rune, or everyone else.”

He opened his mouth.

Then a group of loud novice adventurers crashed into the empty table beside them, all elbows and excitement.

“Did you hear?” one said. “The King met him in person.”

“They say even the sea bowed.”

“Idiot,” another snorted. “The sea doesn’t bow. It *eats*.”

Seris smiled faintly. “They are not entirely wrong.”

Arken sighed. “I want,” he said quietly, “one day where people look at me like I’m just… a guy at a table with people he cares about. Not a problem to solve.”

Alina’s chest squeezed.

“Then today,” she said, “we make that day.”

She reached for his hand under the table.

At the same exact moment, Seris did the same from the other side.

Their fingers collided on his.

All three of them froze.

From below, someone yelled, “WHO TOOK MY BOOTS?” very loudly, punctuating the moment.

Arken stared straight ahead, voice flat.

“I can feel my lifespan shortening,” he said.

Alina withdrew her hand like she’d touched a hot stove.

Seris... didn’t.

She laced her fingers calmly with his.

“This is normal,” she said.

Alina glared. “For *who*?”

“For the sea,” Seris replied.

Evening — Hearthweave Confessions (Almost)

By the time they trudged back to Hearthweave, the sun was melting into gold along the horizon. The day had been a weird mix of nice and emotionally exhausting.

Seris peeled off toward the pond without prompting, sensing something in the air.

“I will patrol the waterline,” she said. “Call if a kraken appears. Or if he stops breathing.”

“I’m trying not to make a habit of that,” Arken muttered.

Alina watched Seris slip into the water, green light trailing behind her.

They were finally alone.

The fields glowed softly under the last light. The house stood solid and familiar. The roof where it all started waited above them.

“Hey,” Alina said. “Come up.”

She climbed the ladder to the roof without waiting, hoping he’d follow.

He did.

They sat where they always did—the spot where the tiles were most worn, where you could see Yoatha’s lights in the distance and Saltwake’s lanterns blinking by the water.

For a while, they just... existed. The good kind of quiet.

“Thank you,” Arken said at last.

“For what?” she asked.

“For today,” he said. “For forcing me to be a person and not a process. For... not running away when the universe keeps stapling weird things to my soul.”

She swallowed.

“Someone has to keep you from doing something stupid,” she said lightly. “Might as well be me.”

He smiled.

The smile hurt.

Because she could feel how much she wanted more.

The day’s little battles—the thumb on his lip, the tostone, the hand under the table—played back in her mind. Seris was ancient, strong, confident, and absolutely not shy about wanting him.

Alina had... a farm, some wards, a stubborn heart, and a boy who was half grieving another life.

But she’d almost lost him to thieves. To pulses. To a stopped heart.

Waiting suddenly felt like gambling with a storm.

She took a breath.

“You know,” she said, voice wobbling just a little, “back at the elf Queen’s party... when I kissed you...”

He went still.

The memory hit both of them—the heat, the confusion, the way she'd walked away before he could say anything.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I remember."

"I did it because I thought I might never get another chance," she said. "I—I still think about it. And about her. Your wife. And if I'm... stealing something from her by wanting you here."

His expression softened in a way that made her want to cry.

"You're not stealing anything," he said. "She's... gone. She's part of why I'm me. But I'm *here* now. With you. That kiss wasn't... a betrayal. It was... extremely confusing," he added, a weak laugh escaping him, "but not wrong."

She let out a shaky breath.

"Seris wants you," she said bluntly. "The demons probably want you. The runes want you. The damn *city* wants you." Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her skirt. "I—I want you too. And every time I think, 'I'll wait, I'll be patient,' something tries to kill you again."

She turned to face him fully, eyes bright with frustrated tears.

"I don't want to be polite about it anymore," she blurted. "I want you to be mine. I want to be the one standing next to you when the world shakes. Not the only one," she added quickly, "I know you're going to collect weirdos forever. But I want to be the one you reach for first."

The words hung between them, raw and terrifying and real.

Arken stared at her.

He was very aware, in that moment, of everything.

His old life. The wife he'd loved. The second chance he'd never asked for. The farmer who found him naked on her roof and decided to feed him instead of screaming. The kiss in a forest city. Seris calling him Master in front of a sea.

He reached out, slow, giving her every chance to pull away, and put his hand over hers.

Her fingers tightened around his automatically.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said honestly. “In my old world, I barely knew how to balance work and one relationship. Now I’m juggling magic and politics and... ocean women. Part of me is still grieving. Part of me is terrified of making promises I can’t keep.”

Her expression flickered, but she didn’t pull away.

“But,” he continued, “I know I don’t want you to walk away. I know I feel... better when you’re near. Calmer. Less like I’m an accident waiting to happen.”

He squeezed her hand.

“If you’re asking whether you’re allowed to want me,” he said, “the answer is yes. If you’re asking whether I want you around... yes. As for what we call it...”

He huffed a breath.

“Maybe we let it be what it already is,” he said. “Messy. A little too intense. Very bad at calm pacing. And we keep... choosing each other. Even when the ocean gets possessive.”

Down below, as if she’d heard that, a small wave slapped against the side of the irrigation pond with more force than necessary.

Alina laughed, tears finally spilling.

“That sounds like her,” she sniffed.

Arken squeezed her hand again.

“I can’t give you some perfect confession speech,” he said. “But I can say this: if the world tried to take you now, I would burn more than runes to get you back.”

Her breath hitched.

“That’ll do,” she whispered.

She leaned in.

He did too.

The kiss this time was slower, less shocked. Still hesitant, still tangled in grief and fear and future problems, but real.

When they pulled apart, foreheads resting together, Alina let out a shaky little laugh.

“Seris is going to be unbearable,” she murmured.

“Seris already is unbearable,” he said. “We’ll survive.”

Down by the pond, a faint, jealous surge of mana rippled through the water.

In the dark, Seris sighed.

“He chose shore first tonight,” she murmured to herself. “Very well. The tide is patient.”

But her eyes stayed fixed on the roof, and on the two small figures sitting too close together against the vast Yoatha sky.

Chapter 24 – The Sky Has No Ceiling

Training the next morning lasted exactly twelve minutes.

They were in a clearing just outside Hearthweave, Elarion’s preferred place—the grass still scorched in spots from earlier experiments, a couple of charred stones acting as cautionary monuments.

“Alright,” Elarion said, rolling his shoulders. “Let’s work on sustained suppression fields. Try to—”

Arken flicked his wrist.

The air pressure around them dropped gently, like someone had taken the edge off a storm. His aura folded in on itself, settling into a tight, invisible shell that hugged his body and went no further. Birds kept singing. Grass didn’t bend. Alina didn’t sway.

Elarion blinked.

“...show-off,” he muttered.

Arken smirked. “You asked.”

Elarion sighed, rubbed his face, and then said the words he’d been avoiding:

“I can’t show you anything else.”

Alina, leaning against a tree nearby, straightened. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Elarion said, pointing at Arken, “he’s past my curriculum. Past my notes. Past my *contingency notes*. He’s not just controlling the flood anymore—he’s picking the water up in little cups and labeling them.”

In the last weeks, Arken had:

- Built a *city-wide “soft mute” field* that dampened his aura to almost nothing within Yoatha’s walls unless he deliberately pushed.
- Invented a *non-lethal stun weave* that harmlessly knocked out those trying to cast detection spells on him—politely.
- Created a set of *self-healing cobblestones* as a test. Irielle had screamed when she found out. Then grudgingly admitted they were brilliant.

And, because his brain still thought in menu systems and hotkeys, he’d created a spell that *taught other people* his spells—projecting a simple, intuitive “instruction pattern” into their minds, complete with “mana cost” warning.

“I’m supposed to be the one redefining magic theory,” Elarion said. “You’re turning the whole field into a toybox.”

He crossed his arms.

“If anything, you should be my teacher now.”

Arken flushed. “That’s... not how this works.”

“It’s exactly how this works,” Elarion said. “I hit my ceiling. You don’t have one. Welcome to the part of the story where the old mentor admits he’s just trying to keep up.”

Alina grinned, proud. “Told you.”

Arken looked up.

The sky was a hard blue, clean and wide. Clouds sailed past like slow ships.

All his life—both lives—there had been ceilings. Apartment ceilings. Office ceilings. HP bars. Mana bars. Skill caps. Rank caps. Deadline calendars. Gravity.

Now he looked at the sky and, for the first time, his brain didn’t translate it into “limit.” It translated it into “up.”

“I want to fly,” he said.

Alina blinked. “You already can.”

“Not like ‘hover over a field,’” Arken said. “I want to go *up*. Through the clouds. Feel how cold it gets. See Yoatha from high enough it looks like a map. Just once without it being a crisis.”

He hesitated.

“And I want you there,” he added, looking at Alina. “If you want to be.”

Her heart kicked. “Obviously I want to be.”

His gaze shifted to Seris, who stood a little back, barefoot on the dewy grass, the morning light turning her hair into wet emerald.

“You too,” he said. “If you’d like.”

“I can keep watch from the seas,” she said automatically.

He smiled. “You can keep watch from the sky, too.”

She frowned faintly. “Sky is... not my element.”

“Then you’ll learn,” he said. “Like I learned not to drown in your pressure.”

Alina bit back a satisfied smile.

Seris considered him.

The ancient, deep part of her balked at the idea of leaving the water—even temporarily. Her power lived in currents, depths, the weight of liquid above her. Empty air felt... unsafe.

But his eyes were bright. Hopeful. Childish in a way she’d never seen in him.

“I will... try,” she said finally.

Arken held out his hands.

“Then let’s go.”

He wrapped them in a spell that felt like a hug made of air—*perpetuating oxygen bubble* was what his brain insisted on naming it. A thin, invisible skin that would keep pressure safe, air fresh, lungs happy no matter how high they went.

“Trust me,” he said.

“I already do,” Alina answered.

Seris met his gaze. “If you drop me, I will be extremely displeased.”

“If I drop you, we have bigger problems than your mood,” he said.

Then he took them up.

First came the familiar part.

Feet left the grass. The farm shrank beneath them; Hearthweave’s scattered houses turned into toys, fields into neat green patches. Yoatha’s walls rose into clear view, the city’s circular layout revealing itself like a coin on a table.

Alina clutched his arm harder, the initial lurch making her stomach flip and her heart soar.

“This is insane,” she whispered. “This is *beautiful*.”

Seris was silent, eyes narrowed, analyzing the way air moved around them, the way her senses shifted without water to anchor them.

Higher.

Clouds rushed up to meet them—white masses that turned from distant puffs into towering, slow-moving mountains. The air grew colder, the light harsher, the world below bluer.

“Breathe normally,” Arken said. “The spell’s doing the work.”

Alina exhaled slowly, watching her breath not fog the air.

They broke through the first cloud layer.

Sunlight exploded around them—white and blinding, silver on top of the clouds, the world below hidden under a soft, endless blanket.

Yoatha was gone from sight. The sea was just a hint of darker blue at the edges.

Seris finally spoke.

“...I do not like not knowing where the shoreline is,” she muttered.

Arken squeezed her hand. “We’re still above your sea,” he said. “Just... farther away than you’ve ever been.”

“Not true,” she said. “I have followed currents that touched void-places. But not like this. Not with... air under us.”

Higher.

The curve of the world began to whisper into view.

Cloud layers thinned. The blue above darkened, piece by piece, toward black. Stars winked even though it was still “day.”

Alina’s breath caught.

The world was *round*.

She’d *known* that from books, from vague diagrams in the Archives. But knowing and seeing were different beasts.

Below them, Yoathallis curved—three continents like sleeping beasts curled around broad blue oceans. Zeno’s forested mass, YoaThallis’s trade-plump shape, the darker, jagged coastlines of Rias.

Her eyes stung.

“This is... ours,” she whispered.

“And not,” Arken said quietly.

He pushed a little higher—just enough that the air bubble’s outer edge shimmered with tiny distortions, like it was rubbing up against something intangible.

“Okay,” he said. “One more trick.”

He reached inward, toward the Pulse that had once shown him Yoathallis from within his mind.

Planetary search, he thought reflexively.

Only this time, he aimed... sideways.

He pictured *home*—the blue planet he'd seen in stolen documentaries and desktop wallpapers, the swirl of white clouds and familiar continent lines, the tiny artificial lights of satellites glinting against black.

CMD-Pulse didn't care about the difference between "here" and "there." It cared about parameters.

He whispered a new command under his breath—a stitched-together sentence of this world's magic layered over a memory of a login screen:

Show origin world: safe, non-contact, visual only.

Reality... folded.

Space around their bubble rippled like disturbed water. For a heartbeat, Alina thought they were falling.

Then the distortion steadied.

Above them—no, in front of them, in a curvature their eyes didn't quite know how to parse—another world appeared.

Blue. White. Green and brown.

Different cloud patterns. Different land shapes. But undeniably:

"Is that—?" Alina's voice broke.

"That's my old world," Arken said softly. "Earth."

Seris stared, unblinking.

Her voice dropped to a whisper rarely anyone heard from her.

"That is not this sea," she said. "That is... another. Another whole ocean. Another sky."

"Another everything," Arken said. "No mana. Just physics, engines, wires, and a lot of people trying very hard to make it work anyway."

They floated in a quiet that wasn't empty.

Arken pointed—showing them where continents lay, where he'd grown up somewhere too small to see, where astronauts had launched in metal tubes that screamed through the atmosphere just to touch this view.

He told them about ships that broke the sky instead of the waves. About how fragile and clever it all was. About mistakes and miracles, wars and networks, stupid memes and kindness that never made the news.

Alina listened like a child hearing fairy tales.

Seris listened like an old god contemplating a rival's portfolio.

"You left all that behind," Alina said softly.

"I died in it," Arken corrected gently. "Then woke up here. I miss it. Parts of it. But..."

He looked down, through the transparent shell, at Yoathallis below them—a different blue, different land shapes, different heartbeat.

"I'm not leaving this behind to chase that," he said. "Not anymore."

A faint prickle crawled down his spine.

Not from emotion.

From *pressure*.

It was small. Controlled. But familiar—the sensation of *being watched* through magic.

His aura flared just enough to taste it.

Someone was tailing them.

Again? he thought. *Come on...*

For days he'd had the sense of eyes on the back of his neck in the city. Tiny, precise pings of foreign mana that vanished when he turned. He'd told himself he was paranoid.

Up here, there was nowhere to hide.

The tracer spell brushed his field like a gnat against a storm.

And then the caster overextended.

Arken's reflex, sharpened by stress and too many surprises, went straight to what it knew best.

Planetary Search flared—not full-force like the first time, but enough to make the world *ring*.

His mind snapped outward, not just for Alina—but for whoever was throwing invisible ropes at them.

Across the three continents, mages jerked in place, hands flying to their chests.

“What was—”

“He did it again—”

“Less—less than last time—”

In the Demon capital of Red, at a high window, Seraith looked up from a ledger, eyes narrowing.

“Oh?” she murmured. “Curious boy.”

Above Yoathallis, the tracer spell's line lit up like a neon thread.

At the far end of it, clinging to the ragged edge of Arken's aura like someone trying to surf a tidal wave, was a small, humanoid shape.

Who promptly passed out.

“Shit,” Arken said.

The spell unraveled; the spy's body started to plummet.

Arken dropped after them on instinct, dragging their bubble with him, Alina and Seris both yelling as the world blurred.

Wind screamed outside the spell's skin.

He overtook the falling figure, grabbed a handful of cloak, and pulled them inside the bubble just as the ground below sharpened from abstract color to dangerous geometry.

They tumbled, weightless for a jarring second, then stabilized at a much safer altitude.

The spy lay on the air between them as if it were solid—slight, breathing fast, glamour cracking around the edges.

Alina stared. “You caught… a person.”

“A very stupid person,” Seris said. “Who thought chasing a storm into the sky was wise.”

The spy groaned.

Glamour fizzled away in patches.

Underneath the borrowed human face were small, elegant horns sweeping back along her skull, eyes slitted and faintly glowing, skin with a subtle, unnatural sheen. Black hair streaked with deep crimson. A thin sigil-collar at her throat, half-melted by Aura Shock.

A demon.

A *girl*, maybe their age.

Her eyes fluttered open, disoriented.

The first thing she saw was Arken’s face hovering over her.

The second was the Earth-projection still shimmering above them.

Her eyes went wide.

“Oh,” she croaked, in accented Common. “I really am going to die.”

They did *not* kill her.

They took her back to Yoatha floating between them like an awkwardly placed package.

The King and Queen’s reaction to “we caught a demon spy somewhere above the stratosphere while showing my girlfriend and my sea guardian another planet” was going to need its own chapter.

But that… was for later.

For now, Arken felt something else tugging at him.

Pride.

From Jean.

Chapter 25 – Ghosts in the Runes

“About time,” Jean said, arms crossed, tail flicking in barely contained excitement as Arken landed just outside his mother’s house in Saltwake.

Behind Arken: Alina, still a little windblown. Seris, very wet again. Down in Crownward, the demon girl was currently being shouted at by three different security departments.

“You knew?” Arken asked.

Jean’s grin was sharp. “Not about sky demons, no. About *you*.”

He stepped closer, eyes bright.

“You’ve got your aura leash on. You’re not fainting after spells. You can fly into space and back without your heart stopping.” His voice softened with something like big-brother pride. “You’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” Alina asked.

Jean jerked his chin toward the city.

“For your rewards,” he said. “Come on. I want to show you what we’ve been saving.”

They walked.

Not to the palace.

Not to the Archives.

To *stones*.

Jean led them on a tour of Yoatha like a man taking someone through a secret he’d been dying to share—through Saltwake’s under-piers, The Crackerjack’s busiest

intersections, quiet corners of Crownward, the gutters of Lowtown, the quiet squares of Hearthweave.

At each place, there was a stone.

Sometimes a paving slab.

Sometimes a corner foundation block.

Sometimes part of an old, almost-forgotten well.

Arken had felt them before as faint hums under his feet, never fully awake.

Now, with Jean's guidance, he knelt and *touched them on purpose*.

"Each district has one," Jean said. "Sigil-cores. My mother taught me to read the shallow layers when I was little. But the deeper patterns—the ones tied to the Pulse—won't open for just anyone."

He gave Arken a look.

"They'll open for you."

The first was in the Verdant Rise, under a carved plinth at the edge of the Archives' garden.

Arken laid his palm on the stone.

CMD-Pulse answered, gently this time.

Lines lit up under his hand—circles, curves, tiny script impossible to carve with normal tools. The world around him blurred, not away, but *aside*, like a curtain being drawn back.

He saw:

A city that wasn't quite Yoatha yet. Same bay, different shape. Fewer walls. More scaffolds.

A group of robed figures arguing around a worktable covered in maps and rune-boards.

At the center, a gently glowing green sphere hovered above the plans, shedding light but no heat. It pulsed in time with an absent heartbeat.

“We can’t kill it,” one said—a woman with wild hair and ink-stained hands. “Every attempt just made it grow. It isn’t attacking us. It’s... learning.”

“It’s rewriting the air,” another hissed. “And the land. And the *sea*. That thing is not meant for this world.”

“Then we build the world around it so it doesn’t crack,” the woman snapped. “We shape the city like a *funnel*, not a cage. Guide the Pulse. *Seatbelt it.*”

Arken felt the last word resonate in his bones.

“We carve roles into stone,” she went on, tapping sections on the map—the districts. “Knowledge. Trade. Shelter. Blood. Law. We tie their flows into a pattern that *makes sense* of this power instead of just fearing it.”

“And if it leaves?” someone else asked quietly.

The woman hesitated.

“Then we leave the pattern behind,” she said. “For when it comes back. Or for the next one.”

The vision thinned.

Arken was on his knees in the garden again, hand on an old stone that hummed like a distant engine.

Alina touched his shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “Just met the city’s architect. She swears like a dock worker.”

Jean grinned. “That’s Arelle. She cursed out half the Council to get the rune built. Mom worships her.”

They went on.

In the Gilded Ledger’s basement, hidden behind a tangle of old contracts nailed to the wall, was another core stone.

When Arken touched it, he saw:

Rows of faces—farmers, mercenaries, mages, smiths—standing in a circle while Arelle and her colleagues carved the first contracts into the hall’s foundation.

“A city this big will rot if power pools at the top,” Arelle said. “So we write obligation into the stone. Blood that takes must give. Those who risk more can ask more. If the Pulse ever wakes in a body again, we want it to see this and think: *Oh. This is how you share weight.*”

A flicker.

A child’s laugh, high and bright, echoing from somewhere above.

The stone under their feet glowed greener for a heartbeat.

Everyone looked up.

“See?” Arelle whispered. “It *likes* that idea.”

Back in the present, Arken pulled his hand away, fingertips tingling.

“The city wasn’t built to *use* the Pulse,” he said slowly. “It was built to teach it.”

Jean nodded. “Mom says Arelle called it ‘raising a god like you’d raise a kid.’”

Seris tilted her head. “She was not wrong.”

They moved on.

Hearthweave’s core stone lay under the old well, worn smooth by generations of hands.

When Arken touched it, the vision was softer.

Arelle again, but older now, eyes tired and fond.

Beside her floated the familiar green light he’d seen in every echo so far—the Pulse without a body. Only this time, it was... smaller.

Not in power.

In *behavior*.

It bobbed like a child who couldn't sit still, zooming from person to person, lighting up flowers, making crops grow too fast, accidentally undoing someone's careful haircut.

"Easy," Arelle murmured, reaching out. The light settled in her palms for a heartbeat, then shot away again. "We're almost done."

Around them, the first Hearthweave houses were going up. Simple. Solid. Meant to hold families, not armies.

"This borough's for people who don't want to live inside walls," Arelle said to the orb. "They'll feed the city. If you must break things, break walls, not seed." She smiled sadly. "You're not ready for this world. And it's not ready for you. But someday..."

Her voice broke.

The orb pulsed, slow and uncertain.

"...someday someone with your heart will land where it's safe to grow," she whispered. "And I won't be here to explain any of this."

Her hand brushed the well-stone, pressing a final sigil into place.

"Remember this feeling," she told the light. "Home, not battle."

The vision fractured.

Arken staggered back, breath catching.

A child with godlike power. Loved. Feared. Constantly breaking reality by accident like a toddler with a loaded wand.

He saw it then—the war eight hundred years ago from *the other side*.

Not as an adult deciding to spare the world.

As a frightened, overpowered kid being attacked by everyone at once, reacting in panic, hurling power down and up just to make the *pain stop*.

The continents splitting.

The beam to the sky.

The bards saw raw divinity.

The survivors saw shame.

The city-architects saw a lesson:

Next time, give the Pulse a *body* and a *home*, not a battlefield.

Arken's hands shook.

"What did you see?" Alina asked quietly.

He swallowed.

"The last Pulse wasn't some distant god," he said. "It was basically... a baby. They frightened it. It screamed. The world broke."

He looked at the well, at the houses around it, at Alina.

"And they built *this* so the next one wouldn't grow up alone."

Seris watched him with a strange, soft look.

"You are not that child," she said. "But you are what they hoped for."

They unlocked more.

- In Saltwake's core, Arken saw Seris's pact in sharper detail—Arelle standing at the cliff's edge, talking to the sea, saying: "Guard the ones who fall between. I can't reach the trenches. You can."
- In Crownward's stone, he saw the original oath of the crown: that the King/Queen would always place the city's *pattern* above their pride—even if it meant bowing to a Pulse-bearer one day.
- In Lowtown's core, he watched them deliberately weave in a "leak"—a way for those crushed by the system to move beneath it, a pressure valve no law could fully seal.

Each stone added a piece.

The world hadn't just survived the last Pulse.

It had *changed itself* for the next one.

For *him*.

Back on the surface, sitting on a low wall overlooking the harbor, Arken rubbed his eyes.

“So the System Voice,” he said slowly, “the one that talks in my head when I cast certain spells...”

He remembered the first “Match found, Alina...” prompt. The calm, almost amused tone.

“That’s not some random god,” he said. “It’s... what? An echo of those architects? Of Arelle’s design?”

Jean shrugged. “Mom’s best guess? They wove a ‘World-Scribe Interface’ into the big rune—something that can talk to anything that speaks Pulse. Keeps logs. Offers options. Warns you when you’re about to do something stupid on a global scale.”

“An AI,” Arken murmured. “A magic operating system.”

“No idea what either of those mean,” Jean said. “But sure.”

Seris’s eyes half-closed. “I feel it sometimes,” she said. “Like a second tide under my own. The voice that spoke to you is old, but not alive the way we are. It is a *tool*. You are not its slave. Remember that.”

Arken nodded slowly.

Pieces clicked.

The System Voice hadn’t *made* him do anything. It had just... offered. Translated. Nudged.

The choice had always been his.

Now he knew who had given it that job.

Later, in Crownward, the last pieces of the puzzle refused to move.

“There’s more,” Arken said, staring at a sealed section in the palace archives—a heavy iron door etched with fresh wards. “The way Arelle talked, there has to be a file where they wrote down everything they tried. Everything they *failed* to do. I need that.”

He could feel it just beyond the wall—pages, crystal logs, something humming in faint sympathy with his aura.

Jean glanced at the sign beside the door.

ACCESS: S-RANK ADVENTURERS, ROYAL SCHOLARS, OR BY CROWN ORDER ONLY.

“You know the rules,” Jean said quietly. “Those files are for people who’ve proven they won’t sell the world for a shortcut. Or for monarchs who already did.”

Arken set his jaw.

“I’m not asking to break them,” he said. “I’m asking to *use* them.”

He went to the King.

Renard met him in a smaller audience chamber this time, with only Elainia, a couple of guards, and a lot less ceremony.

“You want a promotion,” Renard said, after Arken explained.

“Not in title,” Arken said. “In permission. Just to read. I think the answers in there could prevent... a lot of mistakes.”

Elainia’s expression was almost apologetic.

“We believe you,” she said. “But belief is not law.”

Renard shook his head.

“If we do an exception for you,” he said, “we’d have to do an exception for everybody who claims to be special. That door’s rules exist because too many people tried to use what’s in there for their own gain. We can’t bend it, even for the boy the city was practically written for.”

The words hit harder than a spell.

Arken swallowed.

“So I just... wait?” he asked. “Pretend I don’t know there’s a manual for this mess on the other side of that wall?”

“You don’t pretend,” Elainia said. “You work.”

She nodded toward the Gilded Ledger district through the window.

“You join the Ledger properly,” she said. “You rank up. You build trust. By the time you’re allowed past that door, nobody will say you didn’t earn it.”

Renard’s gaze was steady.

“We won’t give you a shortcut,” he said. “Because the last time the world tried to shortcut the Pulse, it almost cracked. If you truly want the truth in those files, take the long road. Let the city see you walking it.”

Silence stretched.

Alina, standing just behind Arken, touched his back lightly.

He exhaled.

“Alright,” he said. “No exception.”

He tried to smile.

“Guess I’m becoming an adventurer the annoying way.”

Elainia smiled back. “The *real* way.”

As he turned to leave, the sealed door in the archives thrummed faintly in the back of his mind—like a locked quest marker glowing on a map.

Not now.

Later.

When he’d earned the right to open it.

For the first time since he’d landed on Alina’s roof, the idea of *earning* something instead of having it crash into him from the sky... felt right.

Scary.

But right.

And somewhere, in the pattern of Yoatha's rune, old lines lit up softly in approval, like a city watching its chosen godling decide—on his own—not to cheat.

Chapter 26 — Sintia, and the Shape of Mercy

The interrogation room was built to make people feel small.

Low ceiling. No windows. One table bolted to the floor, two chairs, and layered wards humming in the stone like a hive that had decided to go to law school.

Sintia sat cuffed to the chair, wrists bound in rune-cold metal. Her glamours were gone. What was left was... unfair.

Horns, small and polished, curled toward her forehead like obsidian crescents. Dark hair cut short for practicality, half-falling over one eye. Skin the warm, faintly luminous shade Arken had only ever seen in demon illustrations, as if someone had bottled dusk and given it a body. Even bruised and exhausted, she looked composed.

Demons were like that, he remembered. Stronger than humans in both body and magic. A better human, some of them called themselves.

Arken, unhelpfully, thought: *that's the most beautiful person I've ever seen*, and immediately shoved the thought into a corner and locked the door.

Jean stood by the wall, arms folded, expression tight. A palace interrogator hovered at the edge of the wards, clearly not pleased that the “subject” was being handed to a soft-eyed world-scribe and not to him.

Alina and Seris were behind a viewing ward in the adjoining room, visible as faint silhouettes through the glassy spell-layer. Arken could *feel* their eyes.

Good. He needed them watching him.

He took the chair opposite Sintia and sat down slowly, palms open on the table.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Her gaze flicked over him, measured. No bravado. No fake fear. Just calculation and a thin thread of confusion.

“They told me you'd come,” she said at last. Her voice was low, a little hoarse from screaming or silence or both. “They said you like talking before you kill people.”

Arken winced. “Whoever told you that is terrible at character references,” he said. “I don’t like killing anyone.”

Something flickered in her eyes at that—doubt, maybe.

He glanced once at the marks on her arms, the bruising under her ribs the healing mages hadn’t bothered to finish, the faint tremble in her fingers where the restraints bit in.

He hated it.

“I’m Arken,” he said quietly. “Before we do this, what would you like to be called?”

She blinked.

“Nobody’s asked me that,” she said slowly. “Here.”

“I’m asking now,” he said. “If we’re going to talk, I’d rather not do it with ‘spy’ and ‘subject.’”

A beat.

Then: “Sinthia,” she said. “The reports you’ve seen probably call me Lyss. That’s… a name for work.”

“Sinthia,” he repeated, letting the shape of it settle. “Thank you.”

Her gaze sharpened. “You’re very polite,” she said. “For a catastrophe.”

“Trying to get promoted to ‘mild inconvenience,’” he said lightly.

Jean made a strangled sound that might have been a laugh and might have been: *please stop joking in front of the demon assassin.*

Arken exhaled, then lifted his hand.

“Before questions,” he said softly, “I want to clear something.”

He traced a small, tight circle over the tabletop with one finger. Runes followed, fast and clean—his own script now, not borrowed, a tight weaving of regeneration, pain decrease, and gentle detox.

“Exevo Gran Mas Res,” he murmured.

The spell clicked like a key turning in a well-made lock.

Warm green light blossomed from his chest and hands, expanding outward in a slow, steady wave. It filled the tiny room, then condensed to a soft field about three meters around him—enough to engulf Sinthia, Jean, and the snide palace interrogator who clearly didn’t deserve it but got it anyway.

Bruises smoothed. Cracked skin knitted. The deeper ache in Sinthia’s ribs faded, the tension in her shoulders easing despite herself.

Her eyes widened.

“What did you—” she started.

“Ultimate Grand Area Healing,” Arken said. “Targeted. Only in this radius. Only as strong as it needs to be.”

“You’re wasting a high-tier spell on an enemy,” the interrogator snapped from the corner.

Arken didn’t look at him.

“Infinite mana, remember?” he said mildly. “I needed the practice. And she was in pain.”

Behind the warded glass, Alina’s silhouette stiffened.

A moment later, her voice came through the speaking channel, edged and quiet.

“Not everyone deserves it,” she said.

It hit harder than if she’d shouted.

Arken closed his eyes briefly.

He understood. He really did. Alina knew what it took to survive with limited resources. On a farm, you didn’t pour water into a field that would never grow. In a world with knives and demons and spies, you couldn’t always heal the hand that had been raised against you.

But.

He opened his eyes again, met her shadowed gazed through the glass, and then looked back at Sinthia.

“I can’t control where the air goes,” he said softly. “If you breathe near me, you heal near me. That’s who I am now.”

Alina was quiet for a long heartbeat.

“...fine,” she said at last, reluctant. “But don’t call it mercy if it gets someone killed.”

Seris’ silhouette didn’t move.

But Arken felt the sea-guardian’s presence like a tide pressed tight against a shore, watching, measuring.

Sinthia flexed her fingers experimentally, watching the marks on her wrists fade.

“In Rias,” she said slowly, “they’d call this a terrible interrogation tactic.”

“In Yoatha,” Jean said dryly, “we’ve been trying not to build our whole process on torture. Turns out, it’s inefficient.”

The interrogator scowled. “I protest—”

“Noted,” Jean said without looking at him. “Objection overruled.”

Arken let the healing aura settle. It hummed quietly, steady as a heartbeat—something he could keep running without thinking now, set to “always on” at a safe radius.

Why didn’t I just do this from the start? If I have infinite mana, there’s no reason not to let the world borrow the overflow.

One problem at a time.

He leaned his elbows on the table, hands loosely clasped.

“Okay,” he said. “Sinthia. I don’t want to waste your time or mine. I’m not here to scream at you, or tear secrets out of your head. I just want to know two things.”

She arched a brow. “Only two?”

“For now,” he said. “One: what have you already sent back to your people about me and mine? Two: how much do *you* understand about what I am?”

Her gaze didn’t waver.

“And if I don’t answer?” she asked.

“I keep you in a warded room, feed you decently, and let Jean stop people from doing worse,” he said. “And I continue guessing at how paranoid to be. Which is getting exhausting.”

She huffed a small, surprised breath that was almost a laugh.

“Honesty,” she said. “That’s new.”

She glanced past him at the warded glass, where Alina and Seris stood like judgment and tsunami.

“You realize,” she said slowly, “that anything I tell you may also be a lie.”

“Yes,” Arken said. “I’m hoping your queen didn’t send an idiot.”

That got a real reaction—a spark of offended pride.

“I’m not an idiot,” she said sharply.

“Then,” he said gently, “maybe trust that I’m not either.”

Silence stretched again.

Finally, she looked at Jean.

“The reports,” she said. “They let you read them?”

Jean stepped forward, pulls a thin folder from inside his cloak, and laid it on the table between them.

“The ones we could recover,” he said. “Encrypted, but our people are good. We’ve also got what you told our less... gentle staff before they realized you’d sooner bite off your own tongue than give them certain details.”

Sinthia flinched just slightly at that. The Exevo had mended flesh; memory was harder.

Arken opened the folder.

Neat demon script, now translated into blocky Yoathan ink. He scanned quickly.

Subject: Verdant Pulse Bearer

Location: Yoatha (primary), Zeno (secondary), Saltwake (tertiary)

Behavioral notes: apologizes frequently; avoids killing even when strategically advantageous; exhibits attachment to human female

(Hearthweave farmer, name identified as Alina) and unknown sea entity (probable Deep Guardian).

Aura: overwhelming. Capable of continent-scale detection. Hesitates to use full force in populated areas.

He kept reading.

They knew about Jean. About Elarion. About the elf Queen's party. About Seris binding herself to him in Saltwake. About his first uncontrolled pulses.

They did *not* have the rune-city mapped. They did not know Yoatha was a sigil. They didn't have the full details of his CMD-style world rewriting. The "world-script" theories were hinted at only in the vaguest terms.

"You left things out," he murmured.

Sinthia's jaw tightened. "I left out everything I couldn't confirm without detonating myself," she said. "And a few things I didn't want my queen weaponizing yet."

Arken looked up, surprised. "Why?"

She met his gaze head-on.

"Because I hated you," she said, so calmly it hurt more. "From afar. You were a threat. A destabilizing variable. A story about power our children grew up hearing as a warning."

Her lip curled slightly.

"And then I watched you run through a market like a clueless puppy to find a single girl," she went on. "Saw you drop to your knees worried about farmers and trees. Saw you apologize to *the sea*."

Her expression twisted, frustration melting into something more complicated.

"You undercut the stories," she said. "You made it harder to paint you as a monster. And I didn't know what Queen Seraith would do with that cognitive dissonance."

Behind the glass, Seris tilted her head slightly.

Alina's hands were fists at her sides.

Arken swallowed.

“Your queen,” he said carefully, “knows about me because of you. How much?”

“Enough to be interested,” Sinthia said. “Not enough to move openly. Yet.”

She ticked off on her fingers, a habit that made her look suddenly very young.

“You exist,” she said. “You can cast continent-wide detection. You can break mages by *accident* just by stretching. The elves crowned you Guardian. The human royals didn’t immediately try to kill you. A deep-sea entity older than our written history calls you ‘Master’ and does not sound reluctant.”

She hesitated.

“And,” she added, “you healed me when you had no need to.”

“That last report hasn’t been sent,” Jean said sharply.

“Not yet,” she agreed. “I’m… adjusting it.”

Arken tapped the folder lightly with one finger.

“What about Alina?” he asked. “What do they know about her?”

Sinthia looked at him for a long time.

Honesty won, apparently.

“She is your anchor,” she said. “The reports say you orbit her like a moon that hasn’t realized it could be the planet. They know she is a farmer with a scholar’s bloodline. They know her parents vanished into Verdant Archives business. They do *not* know the exact location of her farm, the full extent of her connection to the city rune, or how much she can influence you.”

Alina let out a breath he hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Seris didn’t move.

Arken’s skin prickled.

“So the demons know my weak points,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. “And my habits. And my… stupid tendency to care.”

Sinthia’s mouth twitched. “You call it stupid,” she said. “I call it tactical leverage. For both sides.”

“How considerate,” Jean muttered.

Arken closed the folder and sat back.

“Okay,” he said. “Second question. You’ve been watching me for weeks. You’ve sent back what you thought your queen needed. Now I want to hear it in your own words. No filters. No mission phrases.”

He gestured vaguely at himself.

“What am I,” he asked, “to you?”

Shockingly, she thought about it.

Not a performance pause. A real one.

Her eyes flicked over him again—plain clothes, plain face, ridiculous power wrapped like a too-big coat around a guy who still didn’t quite know how to stand in it.

“A disaster,” she said first. “If misused.”

“Comforting,” he said.

“A... chance,” she added. “For all of us. If you don’t let any one nation own you. Including your own.”

That landed harder than it should’ve.

“An anomaly that refuses to be what anyone wants him to be,” she continued. “Not a god. Not a weapon. Not a martyr. Very annoying, from a strategic perspective.”

Her voice softened, almost against her will.

“And,” she finished quietly, “the first person on this side of the war to look at me and see more than a set of horns.”

The room felt smaller.

“Ah,” Jean murmured under his breath. “There it is. The charisma debuff.”

“Shut up,” Arken muttered.

Behind the glass, Alina shifted, some mixture of jealousy and reluctant sympathy twisting in her shadow. Seris’ silhouette remained a dark, steady curve.

Sinthia took a breath.

“My turn,” she said suddenly.

Arken blinked. “That’s not how interrogations usually work.”

“Your methods aren’t usual,” she said. “It’s only fair.”

Jean eyed her. “Careful.”

She ignored him.

“Why did you heal me?” she asked, eyes locked on Arken’s. “Truly. Not ‘infinite mana’ or ‘practice.’ You could have drawn a circle that only caught your people.”

He swallowed.

“Because I hate what they did to you,” he said simply. “And because I’ve seen what fear does, eight hundred years later. I’m not going to become another story demons tell their kids about why mercy is weakness.”

“And if I use your mercy to hurt you later?” she pressed.

“Then I’ll deal with it,” he said. “But I’m not going to preemptively become cruel just in case.”

Silence again.

Then—unexpectedly—Sinthia laughed. Once. Short and sharp.

“You’re doomed,” she said.

“Thanks,” he replied. “Add that to the file.”

She shook her head, a strange half-smile tugging at her mouth despite the situation.

“I don’t know yet if I’m going to betray you,” she said, brutally honest. “My queen has my loyalty. She had it before you existed. But I think… I think she misunderstands what you are. And I’m starting to suspect we all do.”

She glanced at Jean. At the glass. At the faint shadows of Alina and Seris.

“So here is my offer,” she said slowly. “You stop the torture. You keep healing me if your conscience demands it. You let me live long enough to see where this goes. In

return, I tell you when Rias moves. Not full betrayal. Not full allegiance. Call it... turbulence forecasts.”

Jean stared at her. “You’re proposing to become his weather report.”

“Yes,” she said coolly. “Surprised your world-scribe friend hasn’t invented a spell for that yet.”

Arken’s mind spun.

She wasn’t promising loyalty. Just... less ignorance. Advance warning when the demons made their plays. From someone who knew how Seraith thought.

It could be a trap.

It could also save a lot of people.

He looked at Jean.

Jean’s face did something complicated.

“I hate that this makes sense,” he muttered. “We keep her under heavy wards. She doesn’t walk the streets. Every message she sends is copied to us first. One toe out of line...”

“Seris drowns you,” Seris said calmly through the speaking channel.

Sinthia’s eyes flicked to the glass.

“You’re very possessive for a tide,” she noted.

“He is mine,” Seris said. “So is this coast. Behave.”

Alina finally spoke.

“And if you ever,” she said quietly, “even *think* about using me or my farm to twist him, I will personally ask the Pulse to take your horns.”

It was not a shouted threat.

Somehow, that made it worse.

Sinthia’s throat worked once.

“...understood,” she said.

Arken let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we’ll start there. No more torture. Healing stays. You stay.”

“Prisoner?” she asked.

“Guest,” he said. “On an extremely short leash.”

Jean groaned. “I’m going to have to explain this to my mother.”

“You’ll manage,” Arken said.

He stood.

Sinthia’s gaze tracked him, confusion and something else—curiosity?—shadowed in molten eyes.

“You are very bad at being a disaster,” she murmured.

He smiled, tired around the edges.

“Give me time,” he said. “I’m still new at it.”

That night, back at Hearthweave, Alina sat on the roof while Arken stared up at the stars, his healing aura a soft, constant hum around them.

“You like her,” Alina said finally.

It wasn’t an accusation. Not quite.

“I think she’s dangerous,” he said. “And sad. And very, very alone in a way that feels... familiar.”

“That’s not a no,” Alina muttered.

He turned his head to look at her.

“I like that she didn’t break,” he said honestly. “I like that she told her queen a softer version of me than she could have. I don’t like that she’s been trained her whole life to see me as a problem to solve.”

He hesitated.

“And I like,” he added softly, “that you’re still here even knowing I’m probably going to attract every confusing person on this planet.”

Alina snorted, but her eyes were bright.

“Someone has to make sure you don’t heal the knife while it’s stabbing you,” she said.
“Might as well be me.”

Down by the pond, Seris watched them, water lapping quietly at the edges of her chosen shrine.

Three anchors, one Pulse, and now a demon spy bound by half-choice, half-necessity.

Mercy, Arken was starting to realize, was just another kind of spell.

Harder to control. Harder to aim.

But he couldn’t turn it off any more than he could quit breathing.

And somewhere in Rias, far across the sea, Queen Seraith sat back as the latest intercepted report from Yoatha came in, eyes sharpening at the newest line:

SUBJECT HAS TAKEN ME ALIVE.

HE HEALS ENEMIES.

HE IS EITHER A FOOL OR SOMETHING MORE DANGEROUS.

She smiled.

“Oh, Sinthia,” she murmured. “What are you doing?”

The game had just gotten more interesting.

Chapter 27 — The House, the Line, and the First Broken Rule

Arken’s life had quietly turned into a party of four.

That was the moment he realized he needed walls that were actually his.

The palace guest suites, Alina’s roof, borrowed corners of Zeno — they’d all worked when he was drifting. But now he had Seris as a half-divine ocean roommate, Alina as his anchor, and a demon spy-turned-“guest” under house arrest.

He needed a home that could survive all three.

So he went to the King.

“I want a place of my own,” Arken said, hands behind his back like a kid in trouble.
“Somewhere inside city limits. Room enough for... us.”

Renard raised a brow. “By ‘us’ you mean the farmer, the sea guardian, and the demon spy whose existence is already giving my advisors ulcers.”

“Yes,” Arken said. “And I’ll ward it myself. I won’t make trouble. Not on purpose.”

The King sighed. “On one condition,” he said. “The spy lives under the same roof. We agreed she’s your... turbulence forecaster. That makes her *your* responsibility.”

“That was the plan anyway,” Arken said.

Elainia, listening from the side, smirked. “You’re going to live with three terrifying women and think warding will save you,” she said. “Brave.”

The plot of land was on a low rise just outside Hearthweave, close enough to see Yoatha’s skyline and Saltwake’s glitter.

The *house* appeared in a day.

He didn’t hammer a single nail.

Arken stood on the bare dirt, closed his eyes, and reached for a memory: late nights scrolling past real estate listings and stupid dream mansions he’d never afford, clean lines and big windows and soft lights.

He took that image, wrapped it in runes, and told the air:

Copy this. Here. Now.

Mana condensed in a way that would have made half the world’s architects scream. Space hummed. Lines drew themselves in glowing wireframe, then filled in — walls, floors, glass, railings, tile, pipes.

By evening, a sleek, two-story home sat on the hill.

White walls, dark trim. Wide front steps. A wraparound balcony upstairs where you could sit and watch the city lights. Big windows that caught the sun.

Inside:

- **Ground floor:** Arken's room, a huge open kitchen and living area, a study for his spellwork, and a door to a terrace.
- **Upper floor:** Three bedrooms, each with their own bathroom — one for Alina, one for Sinthia, one for guests (Seris preferred water to bed).
- **Outside:** A pool grown more than dug, wrapped in smooth stone and patterned with water sigils, linked directly to the sea's will.

Water, heat, and light were all sigil-powered. Arken had carved flows into the walls:

- One array drew moisture from the air, filtered it, and cycled it forever.
- Another turned a sliver of his mana into steady warmth.
- A third ran along the ceilings and windowsills, turning faint runes into soft glow.

It was ridiculous. It was overkill.

It felt like a promise.

Seris stood at the pool's edge, watching the water fill.

"If you dislike anything, tell me," Arken said. "Depth, shape, temperature — I can change it however you want."

She stepped into the shallow end, the whole thing responding like it knew her name.

"This will do," she murmured. "It... feels like home."

Alina stood in the doorway, looking between the house and the view of the city.

"You built this in a day," she said. "Out of air."

"Technically," Arken said, "out of mana, math, and questionable taste."

She snorted.

“I could get used to this,” she admitted.

The protection spell around the house was, predictably, absurd.

Arken wove a dome over the whole property — layered anti-magic, impact dampening, sound softening. It bent detection spells away, fuzzed divinations, made hostile projectiles think twice.

Nothing from *outside* was getting in easily.

The flaw, which he did not notice, was simple:

He had set the wards to ignore “friendly” signatures.

If you were allowed inside, the house didn’t treat your magic as a threat.

At the time, it felt efficient.

That night, the house was too quiet.

Alina paced her new room, still half-disbelieving that it was hers. She’d never had a space that wasn’t either her parents’ or strictly functional. The bed was too soft, the window too big, the view of Yoatha too... pretty.

Seris lounged in her pool, listening to every ripple, half in the water and half in the mana currents that threaded the house.

Sinthia sat on the edge of her new bed, staring at the walls.

It would’ve been easy for her to hate this place.

Enemy land. Enemy magic. Enemy boy.

Instead, she felt... restless.

He had asked her what she wanted to be called. He had healed her when she’d been tied down like an animal. He had put her under the same roof as the person he clearly loved and the tide-spirit who clearly wanted to drown anyone who touched him wrong.

It was insane.

It was also an opportunity.

She stood and crossed to her door.

Arken was in his room, trying and failing to sleep.

Big bed. Clean sheets. Soft light humming at the ceiling.

His mind refused to shut up.

Yoatha's rune, the Verdant Child, the King's refusal, the Guild, the demons, Sinthia's half-offer, Alina's roof, Seris' endless patience. It all churned together until he felt like he was carrying three worlds in his skull.

The knock on his door startled him.

He sat up. "Yeah?"

The door opened a fraction.

Sinthia's head appeared in the gap, hair loose around her face.

"Can we speak?" she asked. "Privately."

His pulse jumped.

"That depends," he said carefully. "Is this work or... not?"

Her smile was small and sharp. "Both, perhaps."

Against his better judgment, he said, "Come in."

She stepped inside and shut the door. The house wards hummed once in acknowledgement, then went back to sleep.

"You shouldn't be alone with me," Arken said, trying for lightness. "Isn't that what every sane advisor would say?"

"I've met your advisors," she said dryly. "They're busy hoping you don't explode. They forgot to warn you about... other dangers."

She came closer.

There was a subtle shift in the air — not the heavy slam of hostile magic, but a slow, coaxing ripple. The sort of charm that slid past surface wards because it didn't scream *attack*, it whispered *want*.

A demon's specialty.

Arken felt his thoughts... loosen.

The room blurred around the edges. Heat crawled under his skin, out of nowhere. Every insecurity, every buried hunger, every stray “what if” about closeness and comfort and being wanted—all of it surfaced at once, amplified.

Sinthia's eyes were half-lidded, her horns catching the soft light.

“You heal enemies,” she murmured, stepping closer still. “You build them rooms. You share a roof my people would kill for. You have no idea what that does to someone raised the way I was.”

He swallowed. Words tangled.

Somewhere deep in the house, the water sharpened.

Seris went still.

This wasn't normal emotional noise. This was magic bending at a tilt she knew far too well from old wars.

She rose from the pool in one fluid motion, water still cascading from her like a cloak, and reached out along her bond with the Pulse.

Something is wrong.

Alina, half-dozing and fully overwhelmed by the day, jerked awake as Seris' voice brushed her mind.

“Arken,” Seris said aloud, already moving through the corridors. “He is... wrong.”

Alina didn't ask questions.

She bolted out her door, bare feet slapping the floor, and met Seris at the stair.

They reached his room together.

The door wasn't locked.

Inside:

Arken stood too close to Sinthia, his expression glazed, eyes glowing faintly green at the edges. Not the usual soft Pulse light — a fever-bright sheen, unfocused.

Sinthia had one hand on his arm, the air around her humming with charm-magic. It wasn't a screaming, violent thing. It was a gentle, suffocating fog.

Alina didn't fully process.

She just moved.

"Stop," she snapped, crossing the space and shoving herself between them. "Sinthia, what are you doing?"

Sinthia flinched back, eyes darting between them, charm still spilling off her like perfume.

"I'm... checking something," she said. "How far his mercy goes. How much is him, how much is the Pulse. How much it takes to—"

"—break his decision-making?" Seris finished coldly from the doorway.

The tide-spirit's eyes were very, very dark.

She lifted a hand and began shaping a counter-sigil in the air — not the same script as Arken's, but an older, deeper interference pattern designed to cut charm without harming the host.

The magic in the room fought back.

Alina grabbed Arken's face in both hands, forcing his eyes to hers.

"Arken," she said. "Look at me. It's Alina. You're safe. You're under a spell."

His gaze flickered.

For a heartbeat, pure, desperate wanting burned there — not directed, not chosen, just *magnified*.

He swayed toward her, fingers tightening on her wrists harder than he probably meant to.

“Seris,” Alina hissed, not taking her eyes off his. “Now.”

Seris’ counter-sigil snapped into place.

There was a sound like a string breaking.

The charm shattered.

The glow in Arken’s eyes blew out. His muscles went slack, knees buckling. He dropped forward, all that misdirected heat and rush ripping out of him like a tide receding too fast.

Alina barely managed to catch and steady him as he slumped. They ended up tangled, breathless, his weight heavy but not crushing, his forehead falling against her shoulder.

He was already unconscious before he hit her.

“Pulse backlash,” Seris murmured, scanning the air. “He pushed against the charm from the inside while I cut it from the outside. His mind shut down to protect itself.”

Alina didn’t fully hear.

Her heart was racing, face hot with a cocktail of fear, jealousy, and the sudden, very real awareness of just how *strong* he was even when he wasn’t trying.

But he was breathing.

He was safe.

She exhaled shakily and brushed her fingers through his hair.

“Idiot,” she whispered, voice breaking. “Beautiful, stupid idiot.”

Behind her, Seris turned to Sinthia.

The demon spy had backed herself against the far wall, eyes wide, charm-glyphs on her fingers dissipating into harmless sparks. For the first time since they’d met her, she looked *unnerved*.

“I didn’t mean—” she started.

“You meant enough,” Seris said, voice as calm and cold as trench water. “You chose to test his will with magic he did not consent to. You chose to weaponize what you know he struggles with.”

Sinthia swallowed. “I needed to see if he was faking,” she said. “If all that softness is an act. If he *could* be pushed. My queen would—”

“Your queen is not here,” Seris cut in. “We are.”

Alina shifted Arken gently onto the bed, pulling a blanket over him, still shaking.

She looked up at Sinthia, eyes bright with tears and anger.

“If you ever do that again,” she said quietly, “I don’t care what deal we made. You’re gone.”

Sinthia flinched as if she’d been struck.

For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Seris stepped forward, took Sinthia by the arm with careful, iron restraint, and steered her toward the door.

“You will sleep in the warded guest room,” Seris said. “And I will watch you. Closely.”

The door shut behind them with a soft, final thud.

Alina sat by Arken’s side until the house stopped feeling like it was vibrating.

Outside, the view of Yoatha’s lights glowed through the window.

“I could get used to this,” she whispered again, softer now. “If you stop trying to die or get yourself enchanted every week.”

On the bed, Arken’s face twitched.

His eyes snapped open.

“Alina—?” he blurted, sitting up too fast. “I’m so sorry, what happened, was I sleepwalking, did I—” His expression crumpled. “Did I do something indecent? I only remember Sinthia saying something and then she was... close. I think she kissed me?”

Alina's hand moved before she could stop it.

She slapped his shoulder — not hard enough to hurt, but sharp enough to make him blink.

"That's for remembering *her* part first," she hissed, cheeks blazing.

Then she took a breath, forced herself to steady, and explained.

Not every detail. Not every messy feeling. But enough.

The charm. The look in his eyes. The way he'd leaned toward whatever the spell told him he wanted. The way he'd dropped when Seris cut it.

He listened in horrified silence.

"I'm so sorry," he said when she finished. "For scaring you. For being... weak to it."

"You fought it," Seris' voice floated in from the hall. "I felt it. That is why you crashed so hard when I cut the link. You did not surrender. You resisted until your mind threw its own breaker."

Alina nodded reluctantly. "Yeah," she said. "Doesn't mean it didn't suck."

Arken scrubbed his hands over his face.

"Okay," he said. "We're changing the wards. Tomorrow."

He looked up, eyes clearer now, guilt still thrumming under them.

"No more internal blind spot," he said. "If any magic touches me inside this house without my explicit consent, the wards scream. I don't care if it's a healing cantrip. No more charm, no more 'tests,' no more chance for someone to use me as their personal... experiment."

Alina's shoulders loosened a little.

"Good," she said.

"And Sinthia?" he asked quietly.

"I will handle her," Seris said. "She knows now that this roof has lines she cannot cross."

Alina hesitated, then added, “She looked... shaken, Arken. I think she scared herself too.”

He grimaced. “We’ll talk. When everyone’s less likely to throw fire.”

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and immediately wobbled.

Alina caught his arm on instinct.

They both froze.

Color crept up her neck again.

“...we should all rest,” he said, voice a little rough. “It’s been a long day.”

“I’ll stay up,” Seris said from the hall. “The tide does not sleep. I will watch the house. And the demon.”

Alina nodded.

“Try not to let anyone else fall from the sky or cast forbidden magic in my living room,” she said, standing.

Arken gave a weak laugh. “I’ll... put that on my to-do list.”

When she left, she paused at the doorway, hand on the frame.

“Hey,” she said without looking back. “For what it’s worth... I’m glad it was a spell and not you choosing.”

He swallowed.

“Me too,” he said softly.

That night, Seris sat in the dark outside Sintia’s door, eyes half-closed, listening to the rhythm of the house.

Inside, the demon spy lay awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying the moment her charm hit something inside Arken that was *not* empty.

He had almost folded.

Almost.

But not because he was cruel, or false, or secretly like the monsters in her training tales.

Because he was tired. Because he was touch-starved. Because he was human.

And still, somewhere under all of that, his Pulse had fought her.

She closed her eyes.

“I really am doomed,” she whispered to herself.

In his room, Arken finally drifted off, healing aura humming low and steady around him — not for seduction, not for spectacle, just as a quiet, stubborn refusal to let the people near him stay broken.

The new house, imperfect wards and all, settled around its four hearts like a held breath.

Tomorrow, they’d redraw the lines.

Tonight, at least, everyone was still under the same roof.

Chapter 28 — House Rules for a Walking Catastrophe

The next morning, the house smelled like toast, sea-salt, and tension.

Arken had a headache that felt suspiciously like “you tried to get mentally hijacked by a demon and your Pulse filed a complaint.”

He’d already changed the wards before sunrise.

A thin ring of runes now ran along the ceiling of every room, faintly glowing if you looked directly at them. They were keyed to one condition:

Any spell that targets Arken inside this house without his consent → scream.

Not literally scream, but close enough: the wards would flare, lock the room, and ping Seris, Jean, and the palace in one go.

Now he had to do the hard part.

He clapped his hands once over the breakfast table.

“House meeting,” he said.

Three pairs of eyes looked up at him:

- Alina, hair still sleep-messy, wearing one of the oversized shirts he’d conjured “for comfort,” staring into her tea like it owed her answers.
- Seris, composed as always, legs folded under her on a chair she didn’t strictly need, damp hair curling down her back from an early morning swim.
- Sinthia, arms cuffed in soft warded bands, looking like she’d slept exactly zero minutes and was prepared to bite anyone who mentioned it.

Arken sat down last, folding his hands like a man about to negotiate peace with three different kinds of war.

“Okay,” he said. “New house, new rules. We almost had a disaster yesterday, and that one’s on me for leaving a blind spot in the wards. So from now on—”

“—no mind magic on you,” Alina cut in. “Ever. Basic rule.”

“Correct,” he said. “No charms, no ‘tests,’ no little nudges to see how far I bend. If I say ‘you can heal me’ or ‘you can tag me for tracking,’ that’s one thing. But if any spell touches my head or emotions without my *explicit* say-so...”

He pointed up.

The thin ceiling ring pulsed faintly, like it was listening.

“Wards wake up,” he finished. “They lock the room, call Seris, and set off a very loud noise I haven’t picked yet.”

“I suggest something humiliating,” Seris said. “Perhaps a recorded message: ‘I attempted to breach the Pulse without consent.’ On loop.”

Sinthia winced. “You’re enjoying this,” she muttered.

Seris met her gaze, calm and unblinking. “I am enjoying my Master breathing.”

Arken cleared his throat. “Rule two: privacy. We knock before entering bedrooms. That includes mine. That includes Alina’s. That includes Sinthia’s.”

He gave Sinthia a pointed look.

“No more midnight philosophical experiments,” he added.

Her cheeks darkened just a notch.

“I overstepped,” she said stiffly. “I admit that.”

Alina’s eyes narrowed.

“You didn’t just overstep,” she said. “You tried to... *use* him. To see if you could. That’s not curiosity, Sinthia. That’s training talking.”

Sinthia’s jaw clenched. “Training is what kept me alive long enough to end up here,” she said. “But... yes. I misread how far I could push.”

She met Arken’s eyes, and for once there was nothing sly there. Just something tired and quiet.

“It frightened me too,” she said. “What happened. How fast his power twisted under my fingers. I don’t want to see what it looks like if someone worse than me tries the same.”

Seris watched her for a long moment, then nodded once.

“Then learn from this,” she said. “Or leave.”

“Which brings me to rule three,” Arken said. “Sinthia stays here under *very* specific terms.”

He ticked them off on his fingers.

“One: you do not leave this property without either me, Jean, or a royal escort. Two: every message you send to Rias goes through Jean and the palace first. Three: if Queen Seraith orders something that crosses the line into ‘mass murder’ or ‘kidnap Alina,’ you tell me.”

Sinthia’s lips twitched. “You’re asking me to betray my queen.”

“I’m asking you,” he said quietly, “to not help anyone recreate the worst mistake this world already made once.”

Silence.

Then:

“I’ll warn you of movements,” she said. “Big ones. Direct threats. I won’t give you codes or troop counts. But I won’t let my queen walk into a war she doesn’t understand either.”

“That,” Jean’s voice said from the doorway, “is what we call… a start.”

They all turned.

He leaned in the frame, arms folded, face still drawn from lack of sleep but clear-eyed.

“How long have you been listening?” Arken asked.

“Since ‘house meeting,’ ” Jean said. “Some of us take the phrase ‘you live with a demon spy now’ personally.”

He stepped in and dropped a folded paper on the table.

“This,” he said, tapping it, “is the legal version of what you just said. Liya helped me phrase it so it doesn’t accidentally declare war. Everyone living here signs it later. Except Seris, who doesn’t care about paper.”

Seris inclined her head. “I honor currents more than ink,” she agreed. “But I will abide by what was spoken here.”

Alina squinted at the paper. “Rule four?” she read. “No one uses Alina as leverage, bait, or human shield without her written consent.”

Jean shrugged. “Felt necessary,” he said. “Given the trend.”

Arken winced. “Yeah. Keep that one.”

“Rule five,” Seris added calmly. “If the Pulse is overwhelmed and can no longer make sound choices, I decide for him.”

Three heads turned.

“In what way?” Alina asked, bristling.

“In the way that keeps him alive and the world intact,” Seris said. “You temper his heart. Jean tempers his ethics. I will, if needed, drag him away from the cliff when he insists on hugging it.”

Alina’s gaze dipped, anger cooling into reluctant respect.

“...fair,” she admitted.

Sinthia shifted. “Do I get a rule?” she asked. “Or am I just the cautionary tale?”

Arken thought about it.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “Rule six.”

He met her eyes.

“You’re allowed to be here,” he said. “To eat with us. To argue. To complain. To ask questions. You’re not just ‘the spy.’ You’re... Sinthia. But if you feel your loyalty to Rias pulling you toward something that will hurt us, you tell me before you act on it.”

She stared at him.

“That’s not a rule,” she said slowly. “That’s... trust.”

“Trust with tripwires,” Jean muttered.

Sinthia huffed out a breath. “You are all terrible at being enemies,” she said.

“We’re excellent at being exhausted,” Alina said. “Give it a week, you’ll join us.”

Arken pushed back from the table.

“Okay,” he said. “House rules set. Wards updated. No one gets magically hijacked without the ceiling screaming about it. Now I need to do the other thing.”

“What other thing?” Alina asked.

He looked toward the city.

“Go register,” he said. “Properly. Guild, quests, the whole S-rank path. The King said no shortcuts.”

Alina’s eyes lit with mingled worry and excitement.

“Oho,” Jean said, grinning slowly. “We get to watch the walking mana disaster try to pretend he’s F-rank.”

Seris smiled, small and sharp.

“This,” she murmured, “I want to see.”

Chapter 29 — The Guild That Tried to Measure a Storm

The Gilded Ledger sat in the heart of Guild Row like it owned the cobblestones.

Arken had walked past it before — a broad, three-story hall with banners hanging from its facade, each painted with crossed quills and blades. Morning light caught on the polished brass letters above the door:

THE GILDED LEDGER

Contracts. Quests. Glory (terms and conditions apply).

Today, he walked in.

The air changed immediately — warm, noisy, full of steel, laughter, and ink. Adventurers milled everywhere: armored veterans with scars and easy grins, nervous newbies in mismatched gear, mages with ink-stained fingers, archers with bows slung casually over their backs.

Boards covered in quest notices lined one wall. The smell of stew and ale drifted from a side canteen. A staircase led up to training rooms and private lounges.

At the long front counter, clerks processed paperwork with supernatural speed.

Jean walked at Arken's shoulder, hands in his pockets, tail flicking idly.

“You nervous?” he asked.

“A little,” Arken admitted. “On Earth, my ‘registration’ usually involved filling out forms badly and pretending I understood tax codes. This feels... bigger.”

Alina walked on his other side, eyes wide as she took everything in.

“This is where people come from all over the world,” she whispered. “To get work. To build names. To... leave home.”

Seris remained outside, half-merged with the fountain in front of the building. Large crowded halls weren't her favorite, but she stayed close, her presence like a tide just beyond the walls.

Sinthia... watched from a high window across the street, hidden by a light glamor Jean had *approved* ahead of time, ward-ink visible on the band at her wrist. She wasn't allowed inside yet.

One step at a time.

They reached the counter.

A clerk looked up — a woman with dark hair in a tight braid, glasses perched on her nose, and the expression of someone who had seen every flavor of idiot the world could produce and was ready for more.

“Name?” she asked, quill poised.

Arken opened his mouth to say “just Arken,” then remembered the last eight hundred years of lore and the way his mana hummed behind his ribs.

“...Arken,” he said anyway. “No family name. Yet.”

She cocked a brow. “Occupation?”

He hesitated.

“Trying not to break anything important,” he said.

Jean coughed. “He’s aiming for adventurer,” he translated. “Combat-capable, mage-type, support specialty, heavy utility.”

She looked between them, unimpressed.

“Never registered before?” she asked.

“No,” Arken said. “New to... all of this.”

“Any prior Guild-affiliated work? Monster clears, escort contracts, that sort of thing?”

“...I yelled at a Plesiosaurus until she decided not to flood a city?” he offered.

From the fountain outside, Seris sent a very put-upon ripple through the pipes.

The clerk sighed and massaged her temple.

“Right,” she said. “We’ll call you ‘unranked.’ Standard procedure: you fill out this form, we assess your baseline, we stick you with an F-rank badge, and you work your

way up without dying. Or, if you're one of those, you explode my crystal and give me a headache. Either way, we move forward."

She slid a form toward him and pointed at a side alcove with a glowing pedestal.

"Appraisal orb is over there," she said. "One at a time. Hands on. Don't try to game it, it's older than my grandmother and meaner than my supervisor."

Arken picked up the form, skimmed it — basic stuff: name, age, main attributes, emergency contact. He put "Jean" and "Alina" for the last one without thinking, then stopped and smiled faintly.

Alina went pink.

Jean pretended not to be pleased and failed.

They moved to the appraisal alcove.

The orb sat on its pedestal, faintly cloudy, humming with an old, bored magic. It had seen too many hopefults, too many braggarts, too many people believing they were destined for greatness.

It did not care.

"Okay," Arken murmured. "OP isekai scene, take one. Don't blow up the building."

"What?" Alina asked.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Old habit."

Jean snorted. "Just... remember what Elarion drilled into you," he said. "Condense. Don't flex."

Arken nodded.

He exhaled, pulling his aura in tight, tight, tighter — wrapping it around his core until, to most senses, he was just an ordinary guy with slightly too-bright eyes. Inside, the ocean of mana churned, but the surface was placid.

He placed both hands on the orb.

Nothing happened.

For a long moment, it was just... quiet.

Then the orb cleared.

Light seeped up from its depths, slow and grudging, like an old man being dragged out of bed. Lines etched themselves inside it, forming a web of sigils that represented attributes, affinities, potential.

A soft *ding* echoed in the alcove as the reading completed.

Arken opened one eye.

“...did it work?” he whispered.

The orb... cracked.

Just a hairline, running from top to bottom, glowing faint green.

The hum in the room dropped a register.

Across the hall, several veterans turned their heads at once, instincts honed by years of “that’s not normal” moments kicking in.

The clerk at the front desk froze mid-sentence.

Jean blinked. “That’s... new.”

Alina’s jaw dropped. “You were *trying* to hide,” she said.

“I *am* hiding,” Arken hissed.

The orb flared once more, spat out a thin sliver of enchanted metal with hastily engraved letters, then went dark, as if it had decided to take the rest of the day off.

The metal tag sailed through the air and smacked into Arken’s chest.

He caught it on reflex.

It read:

TEMPORARY RANK: B

Further evaluation required.

“...B?” Arken repeated. “That’s... not bad, right? That’s middle?”

Jean stared at the cracked orb.

“Arken,” he said slowly, “F is ‘please don’t fight anything bigger than a chicken.’ E is ‘you can kill rats in a group.’ D is ‘you might survive a goblin ambush.’ C is ‘you have a real job now.’ B is ‘we send you when we don’t want to risk the A’s.’”

“Oh,” Arken said.

He looked at the orb, which was still quietly smoking.

“I didn’t *do* anything,” he muttered. “I literally held back.”

“Yeah,” Jean said. “That’s the problem.”

The clerk appeared at the edge of the alcove, expression somewhere between furious and deeply tired.

“What did you do to my appraisal orb,” she asked flatly.

Arken lifted his hands. “I… touched it?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “You are not the first walking disaster to come through here,” she said. “But you are the first one to make it *sulk*

She plucked the metal tag from his fingers, squinted at it, then looked him up and down again, as if recalibrating every assumption she’d made about the unremarkable boy in simple clothes.

“All right,” she sighed. “Here’s how this works. The orb assigns a provisional combat grade based on raw parameters. That’s your B. It also flagged you as ‘unclassified.’ That part gets you a personal meeting with the Guildmaster before we stamp anything permanent.”

“Is that… bad?” Arken asked.

“It’s either very good,” she said, “or the beginning of a paperwork nightmare. We’ll see.”

She handed the tag back to him.

“Until then, you are registered,” she continued briskly. “You can accept quests up to C-rank with supervision. You do *not* take solo contracts outside the city without clearing them with us first. And if you break *anything* else, you pay for it.”

Jean leaned in. “You might want to *not* let him fill the ‘profession’ line with ‘trying not to break stuff,’” he advised. “It’ll just tempt fate.”

Too late.

The clerk glanced down at the form, saw Arken's scribble, and closed her eyes.

"...of course," she murmured. "Fine. Welcome to the Gilded Ledger, Mister 'Trying Not to Break Anything.'"

She stamped the top of the form with a loud *thunk*, sealing the contract.

A faint glow wrapped around Arken's wrist — a simple sigil marking him as a registered adventurer. The metal B-tag warmed in his palm, then cooled.

For a moment, he just stared at it.

This was smaller than saving cities.

Smaller than world runes and demon queens and sea spirits.

But it felt... grounding.

A path the world recognized. A ladder other people had climbed.

"OP main character, huh?" he muttered to himself. "Guess we're really doing this."

Alina smiled, eyes shining.

"You're going to be the weirdest B-rank this place has ever seen," she said.

Jean clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on," he grinned. "Let's pick a starter quest that doesn't involve continental collapse."

Outside, in the fountain, Seris felt the new sigil settle on his wrist and smiled to herself.

Above, at the high window, Sinthia watched the whole thing and pressed her palm against the glass, thinking of the report she would eventually send:

SUBJECT REGISTERED WITH HUMAN GUILD.
ORB COULD NOT MEASURE HIM PROPERLY.
HE ACCEPTS LIMITS EVEN WHEN HE DOESN'T NEED TO.

Far away, in a throne room washed in red light, Queen Seraith would read it, tap a claw against her lips, and say:

"An overpowered fool who *chooses* not to rule. Interesting."

But that was later.

For now, Arken stood in the middle of the guildhall with a provisional B-rank tag, a too-big destiny, and a party of three terrifying women waiting at home.

The boards were full of quests.

The world was full of mistakes to fix.

And for the first time since he'd woken up naked on a rooftop, his path forward felt... strangely clear

Chapter 30 — The Street That Held Its Breath

The guildhall doors swung shut behind them, cutting off the noise like someone closed a book.

Outside, Guild Row rolled on as if nothing world-shaking had happened inside: smiths hammering, couriers weaving through the crowd, adventurers arguing cheerfully about whose scar was dumber.

Arken flexed his hand once.

The fresh guild sigil on his wrist hummed under the skin—gold ink threaded with something greener. His something.

“You’re frowning,” Jean said beside him. “Is it because you’re now officially part of the bureaucratic machine?”

“The mark moved,” Arken murmured.

Jean’s crest ridges twitched. “Moved how?”

“Like it breathed.”

Alina walked on his left, gaze scanning rooftops, alleys, faces. She’d been quieter since the orb cracked—thoughtful, not scared.

“If it starts talking, we go back in and make them undo it,” she said.

“It’s not the guild,” Arken said. “It’s me. Or... everything else.”

On his right, Sintia walked half a pace behind, hood up, glamor muting her horns into a human-normal silhouette. The ward band Jean had locked around her wrist glowed faintly under the illusion—like a quiet warning to anyone who could see through tricks.

“Eyes on you since we stepped out,” she said softly. “Not just gawking. Counting people. Counting exits.”

Seris travelled as a line of calm water in the narrow gutter running along the street. To most people she was just light on moving current. To Arken, she was a steady, cool presence against his senses, like having a hand on his shoulder from underground.

Something brushes the tide ahead, she told him. *Hot. Sharp. Not the city's pattern.*

“Demons?” he asked under his breath.

“Sounds right,” Sintia said. “My people hate unanswered questions.”

“Great,” Jean muttered. “We barely got him registered and the weekly crisis already clocked in.”

The guildmark pulsed again.

The world cut to silence.

No slow fade. No ringing. One step there were voices, carts, bells. The next there was just the soft scrape of boots and the distant beat of Arken’s heart in his ears.

The air in front of them twisted.

A red-edged oval tore open mid-street, runes spinning along its rim like serrated teeth. The space inside was deeper than distance—more absence than shadow.

Three figures stepped through.

Travel leathers reinforced with dark plates. Cloaks that wouldn’t snag on blades. Horns half-hidden under hoods, enough glamor to pass at a glance, not enough to lie to anyone actually looking.

Demons.

The one in front tugged back her hood.

Short horns, swept back like knives. Eyes the red of wine caught near a flame. Smile precise, like every expression was a choice.

“Sinthia,” she said. “You’ve been slow to answer.”

“Veyra,” Sinthia replied, voice flat. “I sent a report. You read well enough.”

“You sent words.” Veyra’s gaze slid to Arken, tracking the way his aura pressed against the silence field. “You did not send him.”

Jean’s grip shifted on his staff. His tail went still, which meant he was more tense than when it flicked.

Alina didn’t step in front of Arken. She didn’t grab him. She just angled slightly toward him, feet firm, like she was taking her place in a line that had been drawn long before this street.

“State your purpose,” Jean said. “Clearly. We’re in the middle of the city.”

Veyra’s attention flicked to him and back. “The Pulse Bearer is unstable,” she said. “Your city is made of stone and fear. Rias is better equipped to handle beings who bend rules by existing. I am here to escort him somewhere that won’t shatter on accident.”

Seris’s current thickened, water drawing up along the gutter walls.

Not yours to escort, she murmured. *He is already claimed by the deep.*

Sinthia’s jaw tightened. “The Queen gave an answer,” she said. “You weren’t sent.”

Veyra’s smile cooled. “Not officially. Some of us don’t have the luxury of waiting while you play house with the anomaly.”

She lifted one hand.

Sound stayed gone.

The two demons flanking her moved cleanly: one went high, springing onto a guildhouse balcony for angle; the other slid low along the right edge of the street, closing distance at a run.

Red binding sigils snapped out toward Arken, chains of runes meant to clamp and drag.

They hit his aura and came apart.

No flare, no dramatic counterspell—just a soft, ugly shriek as structure met something too dense to parse. The bindings disintegrated into red dust before they ever touched him.

Jean's brows shot up. "That was a serious restraint weave," he muttered. "And it didn't even scratch you."

Veyra's eyes sharpened. "Good. The scale is real, then."

She flicked two fingers.

The balcony demon dropped a tight stun sigil down toward the ground, the kind designed to crumple a crowd.

Sinthia stepped, no wasted motion, and cut a counter-glyph into the air with her free hand. The sigils met, twisted, and imploded in a harmless puff that smelled faintly of burnt cinnamon.

"Do not throw cheap palace tricks in a city that isn't yours," she said.

The low demon veered, testing Jean instead. Water surged sideways and hit him in the chest; Seris had lifted a knee-high wave out of the gutter and turned it into a hammer. He slammed into a wall, dazed.

"Warned you," Jean said under his breath. "We don't like uninvited guests."

Veyra didn't flinch. She watched Arken, not her people.

"See?" she said. "Three defenders. One anchor. You've already built a shrine, you just don't call it that."

"You're the one who opened a gate in Guild Row," Arken said quietly. "If we're counting bad decisions—"

He broke off.

The pressure started.

Not from her hands. From above.

Weight slid over the street like an invisible bell jar, settling onto roofs, walls, cobbles. Lamp brackets bowed. A hairline crack traced itself across the nearest stone arch.

Jean hissed between his teeth. "Compression field. That's not for escorting, that's for... tidying up."

"I told you," Veyra said. "The imbalance never ends quietly. Better a contained break than a wild one."

Alina's eyes flicked up, then back down. Her shoulders tensed—but she didn't rush him. She adjusted her stance, ready to move on his word, not through him.

“Options?” Arken asked, voice low.

“Local cancellation would take prep we don't have,” Jean said. “Breaking her theme entirely would mean throwing more mana at it than she did. Nobody here should do that.”

Seris's water pressed higher against the invisible weight, channels blooming into translucent pillars that shored up the worst of the strain.

I can buy you a handful of breaths, she said. *Not much more. The field is scaled for breaking, not scaring.*

Sinthia watched the runes crawling along the inner surface of the dome, eyes narrowing.

“She anchored it to static fixtures,” she said. “Hooks on buildings and poles. If we crack the anchor matrix, it collapses uncontrolled. That's a lot of masonry coming down.”

“No,” Arken said immediately.

“Then find another way,” she snapped. “Quickly.”

The squeezing sensation climbed; air grew thin, time thick.

Arken closed his eyes for half a second.

The field's structure came into focus—not as symbols, but as relationships. A set of conditions held in place by force, chewing on everything inside its radius: pressure here, give there, lethal if left unchecked.

Somewhere in the middle of that web was a tag—implicit, not written. *Anything inside.*

“That's your mistake,” he murmured.

He didn't reach for more power. He didn't flare.

He did what he was good at.

He rewrote.

In his mind, the compression field turned from a threat into a line of logic.

```
for each object in radius: if object.tag == "civilian" or  
object.tag == "city" or object.bound_to == "me": exempt()  
else: continue()
```

He pushed that condition into the existing lattice.

The spell shivered.

For a heartbeat, the pressure spiked hard enough to make his ears pop. Runes flared along the curve of the dome, red lines overlaid with a thin, sharp green.

Then the weight let go.

The invisible bell jar popped like a bubble. Iron brackets straightened. Cracks stopped creeping. The stale thickness in the air snapped back to clean.

A small, neat glyph appeared in front of Veyra's face, flickered once, and dissolved.

She blinked.

"What did you just do?" she asked.

"Put limits on your mess," Arken said. His hand dropped back to his side, fingers tingling. "You don't get to test your spells on my friends and call it caution."

Behind him, nobody cheered, nobody lunged. Alina exhaled slowly through her nose, hands steady. Jean eased his stance without lowering his staff. Sinthia kept her eyes on the demons, not on Arken. Seris held her water columns in place for another heartbeat, then let them slide harmlessly back into the gutter.

Stable, she said. *For now*.

Boots clanged at the far mouth of the street.

Guard Heryn arrived first, helmet slightly crooked, half a squad at his back. He took in the scorched stones, the fading red afterglow, the unconscious demon slumped in a puddle courtesy of Seris.

"Of course," he said faintly. "Of course it's this block."

Veyra's mouth quirked. "I'll spare you the paperwork," she said.

She snapped her fingers.

The stunned demons jerked upright, pulled by invisible hooks, and staggered to her side. She didn't apologize; demons didn't, not to other people's cities.

"You're not safe here," she told Arken. "You're only familiar. There's a difference."

"Maybe," he said. "But familiar is where I was given a roof, not dragged through a portal in the middle of the street."

Her gaze lingered on him for a breath longer, measuring something new, then flicked to Sinthia.

"The Queen will hear that you drew blood *for* him, not *from* him," she said. "Make sure you're comfortable with what that means."

Sinthia's chin lifted. "I chose my side with full context," she said coolly. "Can you say the same?"

Veyra's smile turned thin.

"This isn't finished," she said.

She stepped back into the rent in the air; the other two followed. The portal sealed behind them with a soft tear, like fabric pulled tight and released.

Sound slammed back into the street—guildhall chatter, distant bells, the normal life of a city pretending it hadn't just been one bad decision away from having a section of itself collapsed.

Heryn stared at the empty air where the rift had been.

Then he looked at Arken.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Attempted recruitment," Jean said before anyone else could complicate it. "Demons. Compression field. Neutralized."

Heryn rubbed his face. "Do I have to write 'Pulse' on this report again?"

"Yes," Jean said. "And maybe 'diplomatic incident' in small letters."

“Wonderful,” Heryn muttered. He started barking orders to his squad, sending them to cordon and calm.

Only once the guards spread out and nobody was actively pointing weapons or spells at anyone did the tight line in Alina’s shoulders ease.

She stepped close enough to poke Arken in the chest, hard.

“That,” she said, “was you *not* overdoing it?”

“I didn’t break anything,” he said defensively.

“Yet,” she shot back. Her eyes were sharp, but the raw fear had faded into something knottier. “At least warn us when you’re about to wrestle a spell big enough to flatten a block.”

“I thought if I warned you, you might try to stop me,” he said.

Jean snorted. “She’d have helped you stabilize the equation, actually.”

Alina folded her arms. “Exactly. Idiot.”

Seris’s water brushed briefly against Arken’s ankle, like a nudge.

You altered a running current, she said. Midstream. That is not a small thing. Next time, speak it first. You have more than two hands now.

Sinthia adjusted her hood, now that noise and people were drifting back into view at the far end of the lane.

“For the record,” she said dryly, “I only throw myself into fights I can do something about. If you’re going to rewrite rules in the middle of an enemy spell, I need to know so I can adapt the cover, not just stand here looking dramatic.”

Arken opened his mouth, closed it, then laughed once under his breath.

“So the consensus is... if I’m going to do something dangerous, I have to make it a group project,” he said.

“Yes,” Alina said.

“Obviously,” Sinthia said.

Correct, Seris said.

Jean arched a brow. “Welcome to having a party,” he said. “You thought this was just about better loot?”

Heryn finished cursing at a patrolman and stomped back over.

“The Guildmaster already sent a messenger asking why the orb is cracked,” he said. “Now I have to tell him demons tried to kidnap his newest B-rank in front of his door. If any of you leave the city without telling me first, I will personally throw you back over the wall.”

He jabbed a finger at Arken’s chest, then seemed to think better of it.

“...through the gate,” he amended.

“We hear you,” Arken said. “Loud and... loud.”

Heryn gave the group one last long, resigned look, as if memorizing the exact configuration of chaos he’d be dealing with from now on, and trudged off to start paperwork.

Silence settled around the four of them again—this time the normal kind, punctuated by distant guild noise and the drip of water back into the channel.

Alina finally let out the breath she’d been saving.

“Next time we come to the Ledger,” she muttered, “I’m bringing a helmet.”

Sinthia huffed a quiet laugh. “Next time, we come with an escort of our own,” she said. “If my people won’t stop poking the storm, I might as well make sure they’re not the only ones with sharp toys.”

Seris’s current curled in a small, pleased whirl.

Next time, she said, we choose the tide.

Arken looked at them—Jean already thinking three steps ahead, Alina still glaring but not letting go of his sleeve, Sinthia irritated in that specific way that meant she was worried and hated it, Seris content to manifest as a gutter and a promise.

He flexed his wrist. The guildmark glowed faintly golden.

Under it, the thin circle of green flickered once in answer.

“Okay,” he said softly. “Then next time... we write the rules before somebody else does.”

No one argued.

The street, which had held its breath, started to breathe again.

Chapter 31 — Patch Notes: Gear

The first thing Arken saw that morning was steel and glass.

Some people woke to sunlight or birds. He woke to a borrowed chestplate on the table, a rack of potions, and Jean’s handwriting all over a scrap of parchment that basically said:

Don’t break reality. Please.

The house hummed softly around him — sigils tucked into corners, little comforts he’d already carved into the walls. Upstairs, floorboards creaked as someone turned over in bed. The faint splash in the side-channel told him Seris was awake in the pipes, drifting lazy circles.

Alina padded in a moment later, barefoot, drowning in an oversized shirt. She squinted at the table, then at him.

“You’re making a face,” she said. “That’s a ‘something stupid is coming’ face.”

He looked down at the chestplate and potions.

“I realized something last night,” he said. “I have infinite mana... and zero gear. On Earth this would get my account roasted.”

Alina walked closer, arms folded. “You already have the strongest ‘gear’ in the world,” she said. “Why do you need armor too?”

“Because raw power isn’t the same as... quality of life,” Arken said. “And because if I keep solving everything by brute-forcing spells, I’m going to burn my brain out by thirty.”

“Optimistic,” Jean said from the doorway, dropping a satchel on the table. “If you’re going to overthrow how magic works, at least let me watch so I can write it down.”

He joined them, tail flicking.

The rack of potions clinked softly in the quiet — blues and purples, the kind of thing apprentices used during exams. They looked small next to the dented chestplate.

“Standard mana tonics,” Jean said. “Standard steel. Nothing special. I figured if you’re going to experiment, better with things the world can live without.”

Seris rose higher in the channel, water forming the vague shape of shoulders and a head, eyes bright.

Show me, she said. The sea is curious.

Sinthia descended the stairs last, hair loose, horns small and polished. She leaned on the banister, watching him with lazy interest.

“If you invent something that lets me fight in heels without scuffing them,” she said, “I’ll call you ‘Lord’ for an entire week.”

Alina shot her a look. Sinthia smiled back with weaponized innocence.

Arken cleared his throat.

“Okay,” he said. “First problem: potions are tiny spells in bottles, right? Someone else’s rules, pre-brewed. I can feel the edges of them now. How they decide who they help and how much.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Jean said carefully. “Usually it takes years to—”

Arken picked up a blue vial.

He let his awareness dip into the liquid — not flooding it, just brushing it with the thin green current that was second nature now. The potion’s structure met him like a closed hand: neat, self-contained, doing exactly what it had been brewed to do.

He didn’t rewrite it.

He didn’t cram more power in.

He just... tied a thread of himself through the center. Like slipping a ring onto a loop that was already there.

For a heartbeat, the vial pulsed with a faint lime glow, then settled back to normal.

“What did you do?” Alina asked.

“Made it recognize me,” he said. “Not as fuel. As... a reference point.”

Jean’s eyes narrowed. “So if someone else drinks it—”

“They get the original effect. Maybe a little smoother,” Arken said. “If someone in my party drinks it, it asks me how much they can safely handle. I answer. It obeys.”

Sinthia let out a low whistle. “So you turned a potion into a polite question.”

“Basically, yeah.”

“And if an enemy drinks it?” she asked.

Arken smiled faintly. “Then it does absolutely nothing and tastes like bad tea.”

Alina’s grin was quick and fierce. “Good.”

He uncorked the vial and tossed it back.

For a moment, nothing.

Then his thoughts... cleared. Not more mana — he couldn’t have more — but a quiet, clean feeling, like someone had straightened the shelves in his head.

“Oh,” he said softly. “That’s dangerous.”

“Bad?” Jean asked immediately.

“No. Comfortable,” Arken said. “Too comfortable. I could get addicted to this kind of clarity.”

Seris’s water rippled approval.

You anchored your chaos, she said. *This is wise.*

Alina exhaled, some worry leaving her shoulders. “So that’s alchemy now?” she said. “Potions that ask you for permission?”

“I mean, I can still brew normal ones,” Arken said. “But yeah. That’s... one new trick.”

Jean rubbed his face. “Do you have any idea what the Alchemist’s Guild would do to you for discovering god-blessed potions in a morning?”

“Hopefully ignore me,” Arken said. “Second thing.”

He turned to the chestplate.

It was nothing special — solid steel, scuffed, heavy. The kind of armor the guild gave to people they wouldn't cry too hard over.

He laid his hands on it, fingers spread, and closed his eyes.

He didn't try to invent a whole new discipline this time. He just thought about what armor was supposed to do:

Take the hit instead.

He let that intention sink into the metal the way warmth sinks into cloth. Green light seeped between his fingers, a dim, steady glow that soaked into the steel instead of sitting on top of it. The chestplate shuddered once under his palms, like a bell being struck from the inside.

Then it went quiet.

When he lifted his hands, faint lines of etching had appeared along the surface — not elegant rune-work, just simple, looping sequences that followed the grain of the metal. If you didn't know what to look for, you'd think it had always been there.

Alina stared. "Did you just... bless it?"

"More like... convinced it to remember what it's for," Arken said. "And listen to me first if something tries to break it."

Jean squinted. "That's not how enchantments work."

"It is now," Arken muttered.

He shrugged the chestplate on.

It should've felt heavy, front-loaded, wrong on a body that had never worn proper armor.

Instead it settled against him like it belonged there — weight spread evenly, movement easy. When he rolled his shoulders, the metal flexed with him a hair faster than it should, like it was anticipating the motion.

"That's cheating," Jean said flatly.

"Hit me," Arken said.

Alina choked. “No?!”

“Lightly,” he amended. “Scientifically.”

Jean sighed, summoned a thin blade of water between his hands, and flicked it at Arken’s chest the way a sparring instructor might tap a student with a wooden sword.

The impact should’ve stung.

Instead the water hit, slowed, and slid aside, losing its edge as it went. It splashed onto the floor as plain droplets.

“Oh,” Jean said.

Seris flicked a bead of seawater at him from the channel. It arrived with a snap of pressure — the kind of thing that could crack stone if she tried.

The chestplate drank it.

The green lines brightened for a second, then faded.

Arken sucked in a breath.

“Okay,” he said. “That felt like someone nudged me. But not in my ribs. In my... reserves.”

“How much did it cost?” Jean asked sharply.

“A blink,” Arken said. “Less than casting a cantrip on Earth. I’m fine.”

Alina stepped closer, fingertips hovering over the engraved lines.

“So now any spell that hits you goes through you first,” she said slowly. “Not your body. Not the armor. *You*.”

“Only if it’s lethal,” he said. “Anything that would just bruise me, the armor handles. Anything that would... ruin my day, I intercept.”

Alina’s jaw clenched. “You’re sure you’re not going to accidentally intercept *everything*? ”

“If I do, you have full permission to knock me out,” he said. “Backup strategy: unconscious Arken can’t overthink.”

Sinthia laughed softly. “Oh, I don’t know,” she purred. “He’s surprisingly dangerous even when unconscious.”

Alina flushed. “We are *not* bringing that night up again.”

“Tragic,” Sinthia said. “It was a very... educational spell failure.”

Seris watched them with amused patience.

And the others? she asked. *You do not craft armor only for yourself.*

Arken blinked. “Right.”

He turned back to the table, grabbed a simple leather glove from Jean’s satchel, and rolled it between his hands.

“Jean,” he said. “You like your fine control, right? What if your hand knew what the water wanted to do before your mind finished the sentence?”

Jean stared. “What if you stopped saying things like that without warning me first?”

A faint green pulse ran through the glove. When Arken handed it over, it looked the same — slightly scuffed, well-oiled, nothing special.

Jean slid it on and flexed his fingers.

Water rose from the side-channel in thin strands, precise as threads. The gesture he made was tiny, almost lazy, and the strands knotted themselves into a perfect sphere with a hollow center.

Jean went very still.

“...I hate you,” he said quietly. “This is incredible.”

Arken smiled, a little shy. “You’ve been rewiring my brain for months,” he said. “Consider it a thank you.”

Alina cleared her throat.

He turned toward her.

She looked suddenly uncertain, which was rare. “I don’t... swing swords,” she said. “And if you make me anything that explodes, I’m moving out.”

He stepped closer, studying her — the way she stood, the way her shoulders tightened whenever he glowed too bright, the stubborn line of her jaw that always held even when she was terrified.

“You don’t need exploding,” he said softly. “You need... room.”

She blinked. “Room?”

“Between fear and reaction,” he said. “Between seeing something impossible and panicking. Something that lets you breathe easier when I’m being... me.”

He touched two fingers to the silver hair-tie she’d been using lately. Green light seeped in, subtle as a sigh.

For a moment, nothing.

Then she felt it — not power, not a rush, just... headspace. A little more distance between thought and spiral. A softness at the edge of her nerves.

Her eyes widened.

“What did you do?” she whispered.

“Asked the world to give you a second thought before it trips you,” he said. “And made it harder for outside magic to shove itself into your head.”

Sinthia watched, expression unreadable.

“And me?” she asked lightly. “Or are demons last in line as punishment?”

“You live in armor already,” Arken said. “You don’t need more walls.”

He picked up a simple chain from Jean’s pile, rolled it once in his palm, and held it out.

“But... charms bounce,” he said. “From now on, if someone tries to twist your will, it hits *me* first.”

Sinthia’s pupils flared.

“Why?” she asked, voice softer.

“Because you’ve had enough people telling you what to feel,” he said. “And because I can take it.”

A beat of silence.

Then she took the chain and fastened it around her throat, lips curling into a smile that was almost dangerous in how real it looked.

“Careful, Arken,” she said. “Keep this up and my Queen won’t have a chance. I’ll defect on style alone.”

Alina kicked her lightly in the ankle.

Seris’s water rose, wrapping briefly around his wrist like a bracelet.

And me? she asked.

“You’re already a fortress,” he said. “But your body still remembers... sleeping. Being hunted. So.”

He reached into the water, fingers brushing the liquid like it was hair. The channel glowed deep green for a moment.

The next time Seris shifted, her form held just a fraction more easily — lines sharper, edges clearer, like the world had agreed she was allowed to exist here without sliding apart.

She inhaled without lungs.

You made the air remember me, she said.

“You’re my party,” he said. “The world should act like you belong.”

Jean scrubbed both hands over his face.

“Do you understand what you did in an hour?” he demanded. “You just rewrote how potions, enchantments, and blessings work — and you did it before breakfast.”

Arken hesitated.

Some stupid, old reflex said: *Hide it. Downplay it. Don’t be that guy.*

But Seris was smiling. Alina looked... steadier. Jean’s eyes were bright despite himself. Sinthia was twirling the chain with the air of a woman who’d found a new favorite toy.

He let himself breathe.

“I’m tired of being just a walking disaster,” he said quietly. “If I’m stuck like this, I want to at least be someone my party can lean on. Not just a cannon. A shield. A... patch.”

Alina stepped in and bumped her shoulder against his.

“You already were,” she said. “Now you just have accessories.”

Jean snorted.

Sinthia laughed.

Seris’s water brushed his hand again, cool and grateful.

Outside, the city went on — markets opening, bells ringing, rumors spreading of a B-rank weirdo who cracked an appraisal orb.

Inside, at a kitchen table filled with steel and glass, Arken Valdros quietly broke the itemization curve of an entire world.

And for once, it didn’t feel like a threat.

It felt like a loadout screen finally catching up to the character it belonged to.

Chapter 32 — Sick Day, Disaster Mode (Revised)

The decision to walk into the Demon Continent started at the breakfast table.

Arken stared at his plate, then at the three women and one very patient Argonian scholar orbiting his life, and finally just said it.

“We can’t keep pretending Rias doesn’t exist.”

Alina paused mid-bite. “The... demon capital?”

“Queen Seraith’s domain,” Sinthia added dryly, twirling a strand of hair. “Land of bad decisions and very good lighting.”

Seris’ voice rolled out of the nearby water basin like a sigh. *The red shore. The continent that calls itself night.*

Jean set his cup down. “You’re thinking about Sinthia getting snatched,” he said. “And assassination attempts. And spies. And you’re tired of waiting for the knife.”

“Yeah,” Arken said. “I don’t want to spend the next hundred years flinching every time a shadow moves. If the Demon Queen’s going to be a problem, I want to talk to her myself. Set rules. Or at least see what kind of game she’s playing.”

“You’re aware,” Jean said carefully, “that walking into Rias is like painting a target on your chest and writing ‘free experiment’ on your forehead, right?”

“I have infinite mana, not infinite reaction time,” Arken said. “That’s what scares me. I can still get blindsided. I can still get sick. I can still screw up and drag you all down with me.”

Alina’s fingers tightened around her fork. Sinthia’s eyes flickered, something sharp and unreadable behind the amusement. Seris’ liquid shape stilled.

“I don’t want to wait until a bad day to find out my body has limits,” Arken finished. “So we handle what we can now. Demon continent. On our terms. Not theirs.”

Silence settled for a beat.

Then Alina straightened. “Fine,” she said. “But before you go marching into a den of demon aristocrats, you’re not leaving my farm half-broken.”

Arken blinked. “Your what now?”

“Our roof still leaks,” she said. “The cows still kick. The crops still depend on me not getting sick or kidnapped by some overdramatic queen. If you’re serious about facing Rias, we stabilize home first.”

He opened his mouth to argue.

Then realized she was right.

“Okay,” he said. “Farm first. Demon continent second. Casual Tuesday.”

They jumped to Hearthweave near midday, stepping out of a soft, green-tinted distortion into the familiar smell of soil and woodsmoke.

Alina’s little farm waited just as they’d left it — fence a bit more crooked, field a bit more overgrown, the old barn leaning like it was listening in.

Arken took one long breath.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “This needs fixing.”

“I managed,” Alina protested. “Mostly.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s the problem.”

He pressed a hand to the packed earth.

He didn’t chant. He didn’t draw a full array. He just... thought in instructions.

If soil dry → call water from air.

If seed sprouted → feed.

If fruit ripe → gently detach → move to crate.

If trough low → refill.

If storm incoming → reinforce roof; seal cracks.

Lines of light followed his thoughts, blooming under the dirt and up the posts, threading runes into fence rails and trough edges like ivy made of script.

Jean watched, eyes narrowed. “You’re warding the entire property,” he said. “Like a living circuit.”

“No more all-nighters in monsoon season for you,” Arken said to Alina. “The cows get self-filling troughs. The fields water themselves. The roof repairs itself during storms. You can retire your bucket collection.”

Alina’s mouth parted, eyes shining as the first trough filled from nothing, clear water humming with a soft pulse. Above them, a loose shingle shivered, glowed faintly, and slotted itself back into place.

“Arken...” she breathed.

Seris rippled up from the old well, touching one of the glowing fence sigils. *You are teaching the land to remember its own kindness,* she said quietly. *I approve of this sorcery more than the volcano kind.*

Sinthia leaned against the barn, arms folded, watching the whole display with a faint smirk. “You realize,” she said, “that if you roll this out to every village, guild contracts for labor are going to riot.”

“One farm at a time,” Arken said. “I’ll traumatize the economy later.”

He laughed.

Then the world tilted.

It wasn't dramatic at first. Just a little sway in his vision, like the farm had moved half a step to the side and forgotten to tell him.

He caught himself on a fence post. The wood was warm under his hand. Too warm.

"Hey," he said weakly. "Anyone else feel—"

The sentence dissolved into a cough that scraped like gravel.

Jean was at his side in a heartbeat, palm to Arken's forehead. His crest ridges flared in alarm. "You're burning," he said. "And your pulse is... wrong."

"I don't get sick," Arken tried. "I... can't. I—"

His knees disagreed.

The farm lurched. The sky smeared into a bright, molten green. Somewhere far away, Alina shouted his name, Sinthia cursed, Seris' water form thrashed.

Then everything went soft.

Fever didn't feel like it had in his old life.

Back then it was sweat, ache, a gray fog around the edges of thought.

Now it was pressure.

His mana didn't know how to stop. It wrapped around him tighter and tighter, healing as fast as his body tried to complain, pushing warmth into every cell and then overshooting.

His normal aura — that gentle, ever-present, world-size Regen — flickered.

And shifted.

They got him onto Alina's bed somehow, boots kicked off, shirt half-open, hair sticking damply to his forehead. The room smelled like herbs and panic.

Alina sat at the edge of the mattress, one hand hovering over his chest.

His aura pulsed.

For a heartbeat, it was the familiar soothing hum — warmth in her bones, fatigue easing, little aches fading.

Then it turned.

Her awareness snapped sharp, like someone had grabbed her by the heart and pointed it straight at him.

He wasn't just Arken anymore.

He was *hers*.

Her pulse sprinted. Her throat went dry. Every rational thought in her head got shoved to the back row by a tidal wave of *get closer, hold him, don't let anyone else near*.

She found herself leaning over him before she realized she'd moved, fingers curling in his shirt.

"Alina," someone said.

She didn't answer.

Sinthia hit the doorway a second later, breathing hard like she'd run. Her usual lazy confidence was gone — her pupils were blown wide, cheeks flushed, lips parted.

"What—" She stopped when she saw him. Then swore softly. "Oh. Oh, that's not fair."

The charm field slammed into her like a wall of heat.

The demon in her recognized it instantly: desire, devotion, possessiveness, all magnified and turned up until it buzzed in her bones. Her instincts, honed to wield this kind of thing, suddenly wanted to use it for one person and one person only.

She crossed the room in three strides, claiming the other side of the bed, fingers reaching for his hand.

Alina's grip tightened.

“Back off,” Alina snapped, not bothering to hide the edge in her voice.

“Make me,” Sinthia shot back, equally sharp, leaning in until she was close enough to feel his fever against her skin. “He clearly needs someone who understands how to take care of a body—”

“He has a body, not a toy,” Alina hissed. “You already tried charms once, demon. You don’t get to do it again just because he’s—”

“Ladies,” Jean said.

They ignored him.

Alina moved first, shifting up the mattress, bracing her knees, reaching as if to shield Arken with her whole body. Sinthia mirrored, fingers sliding to his shoulder, both of them instinctively trying to put themselves between him and the world — and each other.

It wasn’t subtle. It wasn’t gentle.

It was *territorial*.

Seris, half-present in the bowl of water on the bedside table, tried to lift herself and help — and almost spilled out entirely. Her form wavered, edges cloudy, eyes unfocused.

He burns, she managed, voice thick. *Pulse sick. I... follow.*

The water steamed faintly.

Jean swore under his breath.

“Enough,” he snapped.

He grabbed Sinthia by the back of her collar and physically dragged her half a step away from the bed. She hissed, actual fangs flashing, then caught herself, horror flickering through the haze.

“I—I wouldn’t hurt him,” she protested, but she sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“I know,” Jean said. “That’s not the problem. The problem is you *don’t* know what you’d do if this keeps ramping. Look at you.”

He jerked his chin at her hands.

Her claws were out.

She retracted them fast, shame and frustration crashing over her.

Alina was still leaning over Arken, fingers flexing uselessly in his shirt, breathing too fast. Jean stepped between them, blocking her view of Arken's face.

"Hey," he said, voice firm but not unkind. "Eyes up."

"Move," she growled.

"Not until you breathe," he said. "You're not thinking. This is his aura talking through your ribs. You want to help? Then don't climb him. Stay behind him and keep him steady."

Her jaw clenched.

For a second, she looked ready to shove him aside and do it anyway.

Then she saw her own hands. How they shook. How badly, under the charm's pressure, she *wanted* to ignore common sense.

Alina squeezed her eyes shut, forced herself to slide down, and shifted to sit behind Arken instead, his back against her chest, her arms wrapping around his shoulders. From there, she could feel him, hold him, but not see his face directly.

The need eased from rabid to raw.

"Good," Jean said. "Stay there."

He turned to Sinthia.

"You. Chair. Now."

"I don't take orders from—"

"Then take them from the part of you that still respects consent," he snapped. "You're a charm expert. You know exactly what this is doing to you. Sit. Down."

Her cheeks flared darker.

Sinthia dragged the chair right up to the bed, dropped into it, and dug her nails into the wood hard enough to leave marks. She stayed close, but kept herself anchored to the floor, not the mattress.

“This is humiliating,” she muttered. “He gets a fever and suddenly I’m a lovestruck teenager.”

“Welcome to his bug list,” Jean said.

He knelt by the bed, placing his hand just above Arken’s sternum without touching.

Up close, the aura was a mess.

The usual lime-and-deep-green glow was streaked with warm rose-gold — the same color that had flickered when Sinthia had charmed him in Zeno. The charm pattern wasn’t external anymore. It had woven itself into his regen — healing and attraction tangled together.

“Emotional amplification bound to recovery,” Jean muttered. “Of course it is. Why wouldn’t his core decide ‘if we’re fixing the body we might as well make everyone obsessed with it.’”

Arken groaned weakly.

“Jean...?” His eyes fluttered half-open.

All three of them leaned in.

Big mistake.

The charm pulse flared like a heartbeat.

Alina’s breath hitched. Sinthia’s lips parted. Even Seris’ fogged gaze snapped into focus, the water in the bowl sloshing toward him.

Jean slapped his palm flat over Arken’s eyes.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “New rule: no more eye contact with the walking love potion until we stabilize him.”

Arken tried to say something that sounded suspiciously like “that’s mean,” but it turned into a cough halfway through.

“Save the complaints for when you’re not emotionally brainwashing your own party,” Jean said.

He grabbed a chalk shard from the bedside shelf and started sketching a tight, simple ring on the floor around the bed and the basin.

Not a complex ward. Just a boundary. A directive.

Inside: heal.

Outside: *no broadcast*.

“Output down,” he murmured as he drew. “Keep the charm loop internal. Regen: yes. Aura spam: no.”

The chalk line flared a soft, dull green.

The effect wasn’t instant, but it was noticeable.

The air pressure in the room eased. The fever-glow around Arken stayed bright, but it stopped punching outward like a shockwave.

Alina’s grip loosened a fraction. Her thoughts, still full of him, stopped feeling like they were on rails. This was still the man she wanted — wanted badly — but the razor edge of “now, now, now” slipped.

Sinthia dragged in a shaky breath.

“...better,” she admitted. “Still want to climb him. No longer willing to stab you to do it.”

“Progress,” Jean said. “We’ll call that a win.”

Seris, melted halfway out of the basin, pulsed weakly. *Shared fever*, she whispered. *Shared fight. I will not drown him.*

“I know,” Jean said. “Just rest. Your bond is why he’s not worse.”

They rode it out.

Hours blurred.

Arken burned, shivered, mumbled half-spells and half-apologies in a mix of languages. Alina held him through every wave, cheek pressed to his shoulder, whispering the kind of simple, grounding things farmers tell panicking animals.

Sinthia stayed in the chair, eyes red-rimmed not from tears — demons didn’t breakdown that easily — but from resisting the charm drag every time his aura swelled.

Jean monitored. Adjusted the chalk ring twice. Fed Arken water, herbs, cooling compresses. Muttered more to himself than anyone.

Eventually, slowly, the fever broke.

Arken woke up to the smell of mint and the weight of someone's arm around him.

For a heartbeat, he thought he was back on Earth — sick day, someone fussing, the echo of another bedroom entirely.

Then the arm squeezed, a very not-Earth voice murmured, “You’re staying,” and the world snapped back into Yoatha.

He blinked at the ceiling.

“Status…?” he croaked.

“You scared us half to death,” Alina said into his shoulder. Her voice was hoarse. “You also tried to turn the house into a romance trap.”

He turned his head slightly and caught sight of Sinthia in the chair, still there, hair a mess, horns bare, frown deep.

“You owe me,” she said flatly. “Do you have any idea how hard it is for a demon to feel *compelled* instead of in control?”

Seris rippled in the basin nearby, looking thinner than usual. *I shared your sickness*, she said softly. *I do not recommend repeating it.*

Jean, leaning against the wall, looked like he hadn't slept in a week. “Congratulations,” he said. “We found your hard limit.”

Arken swallowed.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“We know,” Alina said. “Doesn’t change the fact that if the wrong person learns you do that when you’re sick, we are *all* in trouble.”

“Like a certain demon queen,” Sinthia added.

“Or any halfway clever kidnapper,” Jean said. “Poison you, let your aura do the rest, walk in while everyone around you is too busy worshipping the ground you sweat on to fight back.”

Arken winced. “Okay. New priority: I don’t ever want to do that again.”

“Good,” Jean said. “Because I am out of chalk and patience.”

Arken stared at the ceiling for a long second.

Being helpless pissed him off. Not in the macho way — in the systems way. He hated the idea that a simple fever turned him into a hazard to everyone he cared about.

He had infinite mana.

He had a brain that thought in conditions and safeguards.

So... fix it.

“Okay,” he murmured. “Then we firewall me.”

Alina shifted behind him. “Firewall?”

“Old-world word,” he said. “Means ‘if things go wrong, this wall burns before everything else does.’ I can do that. Just... in magic.”

Jean’s eyes narrowed. “What are you thinking?”

Arken sat up slowly. Everyone tensed, but the charm field stayed quiet. His aura was back to steady green, with only faint golden threads fading out like the last rays of sunset.

“First layer,” he said, holding up a hand. “Body monitor. Constant check. If temperature spikes, heart rate glitches, poison detected—”

“—you... feel it?” Alina guessed.

“Better,” Arken said. “The spell feels it before I do. And then it does this.”

He reached inward.

Not for raw power. For structure.

A thin ring of light bloomed around his chest for a moment, then sank back in — a band of soft script circling his ribs.

If body_status = abnormal → trigger treatment-pack.

He felt it settle like a seatbelt.

“Second layer,” he continued. “Auto-medicine. Not actual potions — I’m not turning my bloodstream into a soup bar. Just... targeted fixes.”

He thought of the fever. The way his regen had panicked and overcorrected.

“Rule: when sickness hits, heal body, not personality,” he muttered. “No more charm piggybacking.”

A second ring formed under the first and sank in — gentler, more diffuse.

If illness_flag = true → focus regen on cells, suppress emotional broadcast.

“Third layer,” he said. “Baseline heal. The one I already kind of run, but cleaner. Constant low-level repair on me and anyone I choose, without the drama.”

The room brightened as a faint, nearly invisible dome flickered into being around him and then expanded just enough to brush Alina, Sinthia, Jean, and Seris.

Warmth. A soft drop in aches. Nothing else.

“That one’s permanent,” he said. “Mana cost is basically background noise for me.”

“You’re building an armor system,” Jean realized. “Inside your own body.”

“Fourth layer,” Arken said, ignoring the flicker of pride in Jean’s voice. “Spell shield.”

He clenched his fist, then opened it. A thin, glass-clear film shimmered over his skin for a heartbeat, catching the light, then vanishing.

“Any hostile spell that tries to latch onto me gets... rerouted,” he said. “Either bounces, or gets eaten and turned into more regen. Friendly stuff gets whitelisted.”

Sinthia tilted her head, studying him. “You can tell the difference?”

“Intent leaves fingerprints,” he said simply. “Your charm earlier? Now it gets flagged as ‘nope’ on entry. No more free rides.”

She huffed. “You take all the fun out of violating you.”

“That sentence was worse in your head,” Jean muttered.

Arken leaned back against the headboard, breathing a little harder now. Not from mana use — that part was nothing — but from the mental strain of layering the logic and making sure it all played nice.

“Last layer,” he said. “Energy budget.”

“Didn’t you just say you have infinite mana?” Alina asked.

“I do,” he said. “But my *body* doesn’t. So: while I’m awake, all systems on. If I’m asleep, they throttle down to ‘minimum safe mode.’ Enough to keep me from dying in my sleep, not enough to burn my nerves out.”

A final, thin strand of light stitched through the other four, tying them together.

He exhaled, feeling the whole stack slot into place like a new organ.

There was a moment of silence.

Then Jean let out a low whistle. “So,” he said. “Auto-diagnosis, auto-medicine, constant regen, spell firewall, and a sleep-saver. You just made yourself your own healer, medic, and bodyguard.”

“Close the loopholes before someone else finds them,” Arken said. “If I go down now, it’s because something hit harder than my entire system can handle, not because I got the flu.”

“That’s...” Alina hesitated. “That’s good, right?”

“It makes him very hard to take out the easy way,” Jean said. “Poison, sickness, curses, cheap debuffs — off the table, unless they’re built by something on his level.”

Sinthia leaned forward, eyes gleaming again — this time with the sharp light of calculation, not charm-haze.

“Demons are going to hate that,” she said. “We love indirect methods. No subtle hexes. No slow-burn plagues. If someone wants you gone now, they’re going to have to try it the loud way.”

Seris smiled, water lapping at the bowl’s edge. *Loud threats are easier to drown*, she said.

Arken flexed his hand, feeling the layers hum quietly in the background. It wasn’t true invincibility. There were always bigger things, weirder rules, higher systems.

But against sickness, poison, casual spellwork?

Yeah.

He was done being an easy target.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

Alina grabbed his sleeve automatically. “Hey. Where are you going?”

“To eat,” he said. “Then to plan. Demon continent isn’t going to negotiate itself. And now that I know what happens when I crash, I’d rather not give Queen Seraith any ideas.”

Alina didn’t let go.

“Next time you break,” she said quietly, “you tell us before you fall over.”

He met her gaze.

“I will,” he promised. “You two were... intense.”

She flushed dark. “Don’t talk about it.”

Sinthia coughed. “Yes, seconded. We will file this under ‘never speak of it again unless we’re making fun of Jean.’”

“Why me?” Jean demanded.

“You didn’t fall for him,” Sinthia said. “Clearly you were the least fun part of this disaster.”

Arken laughed, a little weakly, but real.

He stood.

The farm outside hummed with new, self-running sigils. His body hummed with new, self-protecting ones. His party hummed like a mismatched but determined orchestra.

He wasn’t unbreakable.

But for the first time, he felt like if the world wanted to crack him, it would at least have to *try*.

“Okay,” he said. “Farm stabilized. Bug patch applied. Next on the list—”

Alina, Sinthia, Seris, and Jean all answered in a different way:

“Rias.”

“The Demon Queen.”

The red shore.

“—making sure you don’t flirt with death in front of her, too.”

Arken grinned despite himself.

“Right,” he said. “Let’s go tell a Demon Queen that the walking bug she’s heard about just installed anti-cheat.”

Chapter 33 — Roses, Wards, and Other Bad Ideas

They didn’t actually understand what Arken had just said, so they ignored it.

“We should probably go deal with the Demon Continent so I can stop worrying about kidnappings and assassination side-quests,” he’d muttered.

Jean had blinked.

Alina had blinked.

Seris’s eyes had narrowed in the way that meant *I heard you, I’m just pretending I didn’t.*

Sinthia had smiled like he’d just promised her a honeymoon.

Silence.

“Anyway!” Arken clapped his hands once, too bright. “Quest board.”

Everyone silently agreed to pretend the “let’s go talk to the Demon Queen” line had been a joke.

For now.

The Gilded Ledger’s main hall hummed around them — clatter of armor, the scrape of chairs, the low roar of a dozen arguments about pay, loot, and whose fault last night’s tavern fight had been.

In front of the quest board, Arken scanned parchment after parchment until one title snagged his eye:

WITHERING ROSES NEEDED — RIAS PROVINCE, DEMON CONTINENT

Use: alchemical / medicinal.

Preferred Quantity: five (5).

“Gathering quest,” he said. “On the Demon continent. No army, no siege, just... flowers.”

Jean leaned in. “Remote province, not the capital,” he noted. “Less ‘political assassination,’ more ‘local wildlife wants to eat you.’ I’ve seen worse bets.”

“Only you people could say ‘we’re going into demon territory’ like you’re picking a new bakery,” Alina muttered. “But if it keeps Sintia from getting snatched again...”

“I am *right here*,” Sintia said, sliding closer to Arken’s side, horns faintly glinting under her glamor. “And for the record, anyone trying to steal me from him is free to try. I enjoy watching people fail.”

Alina’s eye twitched.

Arken reached up and plucked the parchment from the board. The words *Quantity: five (5)* stared back at him.

A whole continent just to pick five plants, he thought. *That’s a lot of walking for one fetch quest.*

Then the old, dangerous part of his brain—the one that had once spent nights breaking video game systems for fun—whispered:

What if we only find one... and just copy it?

A spell shape fluttered at the edge of his thoughts. Not full code. Just a concept.

Target: object. Effect: duplicate. Source: own mana. Limit: local reality tolerance.

He snorted under his breath, and the snort turned into a grin that was, frankly, a little unhinged.

Jean looked over. “Oh no.”

“What?” Arken said.

“That face,” Jean said. “That’s your ‘what if I did something morally gray and physically impossible just to see if it works’ face.”

“It’s not morally gray,” Arken protested. “It’s... resource efficient.”

Sinthia purred. “Whatever that look is, I like it. It’s the ‘I am considering crimes against common sense’ expression. Very demon-core. Ten out of ten, would enable.”

Alina squinted. “If that look ends in another crater, I’m making you plow fields by hand until you beg for death.”

Seris’s voice rolled faintly through the fountain pipes. “If that look ends with another tidal event, I’m disowning you.”

“Rude,” Arken muttered. “Okay, new plan. Before we go anywhere near demon territory, I want to make a stop.”

Jean arched a brow. “Supplies?”

“Something better,” Arken said. “Family.”

They cut through Saltwake’s busier streets, leaving the guild behind. Sinthia clung to Arken’s arm so tightly that even his infinite mana couldn’t save his circulation.

“You know,” she mused, “if we are going to my homeland, we should have a serious outfit discussion.”

Alina, walking on his other side, tensed. “He has clothes.”

“Not good enough,” Sinthia said. “Demon nobles grade on presentation. I am thinking black coat, high collar, maybe something that laces up the front—”

“Why would a coat lace up the front?” Arken asked weakly.

“So it can also lace *down*,” she replied, absolutely straight-faced.

Alina choked. “Sinthia!”

“What?” Sinthia blinked innocently. “I’m just making sure our walking apotheosis doesn’t get laughed at in court. If they’re going to kneel, they should at least enjoy the view.”

Arken made a small dying noise.

Seris flowed along beside them in gutter-water and rain channels, solidifying only enough to roll her eyes. “You did this to yourself when you healed her,” she reminded Arken. “You turned a professional spy into a shameless one.”

“I’m starting to notice,” he muttered.

Jean’s mother’s house sat near the quieter docks; the sound of waves here was less “crash” and more “breathe.” Nets hung to dry, shells clinked in the wind, and the chimes outside the door sang a soft, restless tune.

The door opened before they knocked.

“Jean,” Maritha said, relief sharpening her features. “You didn’t drown.”

“Nice to see you too, Mam,” he said, letting himself be dragged into a hug.

Then her eyes moved past him and took in the party.

Alina dipped her head politely. “Thank you for having us.”

Seris formed up just enough to incline hers. “Your tides are steady,” she said, which was as close as a sea spirit got to ‘your house feels nice.’

Sinthia stepped forward like she owned the street. “You must be the one who made Jean tolerable,” she said. “On behalf of everyone, thank you. Also, if you ever want to trade embarrassing childhood stories for information on demon court politics, I am *very* flexible.”

Maritha stared at her horns, her smug smile, and her hand still looped around Arken’s arm.

“You’re the spy,” she said.

Sinthia beamed. “I prefer ‘intelligence specialist with great legs,’ but yes.”

Jean buried his face in his hands. “Mam, please don’t adopt her.”

“I’m open to negotiation,” Sinthia said immediately.

Alina stepped between them on reflex. “Can we maybe go inside before she starts negotiating dowries?”

Maritha snorted and stepped aside. “Fine. All of you, in. Before the neighbors decide to blame another earthquake on my doorstep.”

Inside, the house was small, worn, and full of a warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. Dried herbs hung near the rafters. The table bore the scars of a hundred shared meals. A dent in the far wall looked suspiciously fist-shaped.

“Sit,” Maritha ordered, already reaching for the teapot. “If you can break my city, you can handle my furniture.”

Sinthia slid into a seat beside Arken, knees *far* too close to his. “If you don’t finish your tea,” she whispered, “I’ll just drink it from your mouth.”

He nearly inhaled steam.

Alina kicked her under the table.

“Ow.” Sinthia didn’t move. “Violence out of jealousy is so *retro*. I love it.”

“Be normal,” Alina hissed.

“Have you seen the man we’re sitting next to?” Sinthia shot back. “Normal left the building the day he landed on a roof naked.”

Maritha set cups down with practiced thunks, ignoring all of it with the serene power of a woman who had outlived storms and teenage Jean.

Arken wrapped his hands around his cup, feeling heat against skin that once hadn’t existed at all. The familiarity of it made his throat tighten.

“I, uh...” He swallowed. “I wanted to thank you. Properly. Before we leave.”

Maritha gave him a long, assessing look. “You already did,” she said. “You kept my son alive in work that usually eats people. That’s thanks enough.”

Jean started. “Mam—”

“Let me finish,” she snapped automatically, then nodded at Arken. “Go on. You clearly rehearsed something.”

“I... don’t have people here,” Arken said quietly. “Not the way Jean does. My family is... somewhere I can’t get back to. But every time we come here, it feels like the kind of place my mother would have tried to turn a house into. Smells like food and grief and stubbornness. Familiar.”

He rubbed a thumb along the cup’s edge.

“If I had a son walking into the kind of trouble Jean does,” he continued, “I’d want someone to keep his feet on the ground. You did that before I showed up. So the only way I know how to honor that is... like this.”

He stood, set his cup aside, and touched the doorframe.

No chant. No sigil. Just a quiet decision and a thread of concentrated intent.

Thin green light crawled along the wood like moss catching sunlight. It traced the lintel, curled down the sides, then sank, seeping into the house’s bones. A muffled hush fell over the room as the outside world... stepped back. Wind still blew. The sea still breathed. But their teeth were blunted at the threshold.

The air felt thicker. Softer. Safe.

Maritha’s eyes narrowed, not in suspicion, but in professional curiosity. She knew wards. She’d watched Jean burn ink into his skin for years.

“That’s not ‘just a ward,’” she said slowly.

Arken shrugged, too casual. “Basic,” he lied. “Deflects hostile intent, muffles stray spells, nudges bad luck sideways. If anything tries to bite the house in half, it’ll stub its teeth first. Maybe.”

Jean stared at the doorway, then at him. “Do you have any idea what master crafters would pay to make something like that even *once*? ”

“Good thing I’m not charging,” Arken said. “Consider it... rent. For all the times your son pulled me out of my own mess.”

Sinthia pressed a hand to her chest. “If this is how you say thank you to someone else’s mother,” she sighed, “I am terrified—in a very good way—of what you would do to protect your own house.”

Alina’s cheeks colored, but she didn’t argue.

Maritha watched the last of the light fade.

“The sea liked that,” she said. “The walls too. They feel... steadier.” She met Arken’s gaze. “You’re dangerous. I don’t like that. But you’re dangerous in the right direction. I do like that. Thank you.”

He let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Thank you for letting him be who he is,” he answered. “I’m trying to do the same. Just... with more firewalls.”

Jean reached over and squeezed his forearm once — brief, awkward, sincere. “She’s the closest thing I have to normal,” he said quietly. “Keep the rest of the world pointed away from her.”

“That’s the plan,” Arken said.

Sinthia leaned her chin on Arken’s shoulder. “You know,” she murmured, “if you keep impressing people’s mothers, the marriage hints are going to stop being jokes.”

Alina choked on tea. “SINTHIA.”

Maritha snorted into her cup. “If either of you tries to marry my son’s walking catastrophe, I am charging bride price in advance. In gold. And silence.”

“Done,” Sinthia said instantly.

Jean made a strangled noise that sounded suspiciously like praying.

They left to the sound of Maritha’s wind chimes singing a different note — softer, steadier, ward-lines settling into harmony with tide.

Outside, Saltwake glittered under noon light. The water along the harbor’s edge rolled against the stones with unusual gentleness.

Seris rose from the surface in a smooth column, reforming beside Arken.

“You anchored her house well,” she said. “The currents approve.”

“Good,” he replied. “We’re going to be far away. I’d like at least one corner of this world not worrying about me.”

He turned to his party.

“Right,” he said. “Demon continent time. Everybody packed? Emotionally? Physically? Spiritually?”

“No,” Alina said. “But if I waited to feel ready every time you did something insane, we’d never leave the farm.”

Jean tightened the straps on his satchel. Faint runes lit along his forearms, reacting to his anticipation. “Somebody has to stop you from negotiating yourself into a demon marriage treaty.”

Sinthia laced her fingers through Arken’s again, shameless. “You say that like it’s a threat and not a fantasy,” she said. “For the record, if the Queen offers him a throne, I am taking notes.”

Seris looked toward the open sea. “Rias’s waters are arrogant,” she warned. “They will not welcome me easily.”

Arken flexed his hand once, feeling shield spells hum around his body — the anti-sickness arrays, the auto-heal loop, the quiet barrier that kept enchantments from slipping in again.

“We won’t be there to make friends with the tides,” he said. “We’ll be there to make sure they don’t swallow us.”

He lifted his hand.

The teleport anchor to Zeno tugged at him like a half-remembered song: a cliff-edge, salt on the air, pine and stone. Elarion’s work laced through it, steady and precise.

Arken didn’t speak the instructions. He thought them.

Here. Then there. Carry all, break nothing.

Green light spiraled up around their feet, a soft cyclone that smelled briefly of forests and fresh rain. Saltwake blurred. The docks smeared into streaks. The sound stretched thin.

The world snapped.

They stood on a rock.

Wind hit first — cold, clean, carrying the sharp bite of pine sap and distant snowfields. Waves hammered the cliffs below in slow, deep booms. Out on the horizon, the sky darkened where the Demon continent’s miasma seeped into clouds like spilled ink.

Alina swallowed. “I thought I’d be sick,” she said. “I’m just... dizzy.”

“Give it a minute,” Jean advised. “Your stomach hasn’t caught up yet.”

Sinthia stepped to the cliff’s edge, hair whipping in the wind, eyes fixed on the far dark smear. Home and danger and history all wrapped into one distance.

“Well,” she said. “There it is. My charmingly awful backyard.”

Seris let her form dissolve halfway, letting sea spray pass through her. “The water complains,” she murmured. “It says the other side bites.”

Arken stared out across the waves, feeling his mana settle into a new, taut rhythm. Somewhere out there waited a demon queen, withering roses, and a continent full of people who might decide he was either a weapon, a threat, or a prize.

His heart beat anyway.

“Okay,” he said, voice steady.

“Let’s go pick some flowers.” 

Chapter 33 — Dinosaurs, Demons, and Bad Decisions

Arken had never carried four people at once before, but apparently his mana hadn’t gotten the memo about limits.

He lifted his hand, thought *up*, and the world obeyed.

A soft green field wrapped around the group like invisible arms. Feet left the ground. Alina grabbed his sleeve on instinct. Jean swore under his breath. Seris flowed seamlessly into the spell like she’d been born for it. Sinthia pressed herself against his side like this was the best day of her life.

“Oh my,” she purred as the cliffs shrank beneath them. “If you pick me up like this now, I *desperately* want to see what you do when we’re alone.”

Arken’s brain blue-screened for a heartbeat.

“Can you *not* say things like that during flight?” he managed. “We’re over a cliff.”

“That’s why it’s exciting,” she said brightly.

Alina's eye twitched so hard it could've powered a spell. "If you make him lose concentration, I'm throwing you into the ocean myself."

Seris looked up, amused. "Please do. I'd like to see if demons float."

"Rude," Sinthia sniffed, completely unbothered.

The air thinned as they climbed, wind tugging at clothes and hair. Below, Zeno's coastline unfolded in deep greens and silver rivers, the elven forest spreading outward like a living sea.

They drifted inland, cutting over the treetops. Sunlight slanted through canopies that glowed faintly with borrowed mana, leaves whispering old spells to each other.

Ahead, the Living Court came into view — vast trees woven into palaces, bridges grown from interlocking branches, banners of living vine and flower cascading down in gentle arcs. On a high balcony, Queen Lysoria stood with several matrons, the white-gold of her hair catching the light.

Arken blinked. "...They're outside."

Alina lifted a hand, hesitated, then waved anyway. Jean followed, giving a small, respectful salute. Even at this height, they could feel the forest watching them, measuring, remembering.

On the balcony far below, tiny shapes lifted their hands in return — the Queen and her council acknowledging the strange little flock crossing their skies.

Sinthia leaned closer to Arken, voice low. "You know we are currently flying over a continent that barely tolerates demons."

"Yeah," he said. "That's why we're not stopping."

He could almost hear Elarion's voice in his head: *Arrive with a demon unannounced and I'll personally tie you to a research table, boy.*

"Later," Arken murmured to the distant palace. "We'll visit when it's not... politically stupid."

They glided onward, leaving Zeno behind. The forest thinned. The sea returned beneath them in shifting blues and whitecaps. On the far horizon, the sky darkened — a heavy smear of bruised clouds and strange light where the Demon continent waited.

Rias.

Arken felt himself tense, waiting for the cliché: ominous thunder, volcanic spikes, screaming souls, the usual dramatics.

Instead, as they drew closer, the coastline came into focus... and it was gorgeous.

Sheer cliffs of black stone glimmered with veins of green crystal. Waterfalls spilled from hidden springs, turning into mist that refracted eerie colors in the air. Forests clung to impossible angles, leaves edged in deep crimson. Strange birds wheeled in flocks, flashing iridescent wings.

"Of course it's pretty," Sinthia said, catching his expression. "We're not monsters. We just have taste."

"You say that like those words go together," Jean muttered.

Arken huffed a laugh. *Even when everyone trash-talks the place, it still gets to be this beautiful*, he thought. *Figures*.

They flew lower, following a river that cut through twisted stone. The air grew warmer, spiced with something metallic and sweet.

Arken squinted at the valley ahead—

—and then his eyes went wide.

A massive shape lumbered between jagged rocks below. Brown-green hide, huge head, jaws full of serrated teeth, tail heavy enough to flatten houses. It stomped after something large and horned—

Arken's brain didn't see "mutant apex predator."

It saw *T-Rex*.

He slapped a hand against Jean's arm. "SINTHIA," he yelled over the wind, "YOU GUYS HAVE DINOSAURSSSS."

Sinthia blinked down. "Do we?"

"That," Arken pointed, nearly vibrating, "is a dinosaur."

She tilted her head. "That is a gore-lord ridgebeast. Mutated reptile. Territorial. Will bite your head off if you look at its food wrong."

"Dinosaur," Arken repeated reverently.

Alina stared at him. “This is not the time to be happy.”

“It’s exactly the time,” he insisted.

The ridgebeast had cornered its dinner — a hulking, six-legged deer-thing the size of a cottage. It tore into the carcass, bones cracking like kindling.

Arken started descending.

Jean grabbed his sleeve. “What are you doing.”

“I’m gonna pet it,” Arken said.

There was a full second of perfect silence.

Then all three women hit him with a chorus of:

“NO.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“MASTER, PLEASE.”

“It’s not domesticated,” Jean said tightly. “They are not tame mounts. They are wild, mutated, *murder lizards*.¹”

“It’s eating,” Alina hissed. “It’s going to think you’re there to take its food!”

“Exactly,” Sinthia added. “If you die stupidly, I will resurrect you just to murder you myself.”

Arken ignored them.

He focused, adjusted the flight field, and left them gently suspended in midair like a cluster of grumpy balloons, drifting safely out of reach.

“Stay,” he said.

“You cannot just ‘stay’ us,” Jean snapped, legs kicking uselessly. “ARKEN—”

Too late.

Arken dropped.

Wind tore past him; the ground rushed up. He softened his landing with a thought and touched down on black rock a short distance from the ridgebeast.

Up close, it was even larger — ten stories of hunger and scales, thick neck muscles bunching as it tore another chunk from the massive deer. Blood steamed on the ground. Its tiny, bright eyes tracked movement immediately.

It saw Arken.

It roared.

The sound hit like a wall. Birds exploded from nearby trees, screeching. Alina flinched in midair. Jean's ears rang.

Arken just stood there, heart thumping more from excitement than fear.

“Hey, buddy,” he said softly.

The ridgebeast dropped its kill.

Very slowly, it turned its whole bulk toward him, tail gouging a trench in the ground. Its massive head dipped. Saliva and blood dripped from jagged teeth.

Then, with the inevitability of a falling boulder, it charged.

Up above, all four of them screamed.

“WATCH OUT!”

“SHIELD—”

“MASTER!”

Seris surged in her suspended bubble, waves of water slamming uselessly against the invisible confines of Arken’s spell. Synthia snarled something in demonic that probably translated to “if he dies I’m burning this continent.”

Arken did not raise a shield.

He did not move.

He opened his arms.

The ridgebeast hit him like a meteor.

Reality bucked. Dust exploded outward. A shockwave rolled through the ravine, flattening scrub and sending pebbles skittering.

And then...

The beast bounced.

It rebounded off an invisible surface around Arken like it had rammed a god's palm. Momentum flipped it sideways. Ten stories of muscle and rage crashed to the ground with a thundering *WHUD*, head slamming into the rock.

The ridgebeast went limp.

A ringing silence followed.

Arken blinked dust out of his lashes.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "You're so *cool*."

He walked over to the unconscious monster the way someone walks toward a sleeping puppy. Up above, distant and outraged, Jean was still screaming his name.

Arken ignored him and laid a hand against the creature's massive snout.

The skin was rough, warm, faintly scarred. It breathed in heavy huffs, stunned but alive.

He stroked its nose gently. "You tried your best," he murmured. "Ten out of ten charge. Terrible choice of target."

The ridgebeast snored.

Arken smiled, soft and stupidly fond. "I'll be back for you," he promised. "We're gonna be friends. You just don't know it yet."

He gave the enormous jaw one last pat, then pushed off the ground and rose back into the air, rejoining his floating, horrified party.

Jean stared at him like he was something between a miracle and a crime.

"Do you ever," Jean asked, voice very calm in the way people get when they're trying not to scream, "do anything at a *normal* level?"

Arken thought about it. "I sleep," he offered.

“Barely,” Alina muttered, clutching his arm with white knuckles. “And apparently not in ways that keep me sane.”

Sinthia still had a hand pressed over her heart. “If you ride that thing into demon court,” she said faintly, “half the nobles are going to propose on the spot.”

Seris exhaled like the ocean after a storm. “Next time, warn me when you plan to let gravity flirt with extinction,” she said. “I dislike screaming.”

“Noted,” Arken said, sheepish. “Sorry. It just... looked really pettable.”

“That is *not* a word,” Jean said.

“It is now,” Arken replied.

They flew on, deeper into Rias.

The land shifted from rugged cliffs to rolling, dark hills and scattered farms. The soil here drank light oddly; crops gleamed with faint internal glow — herbs whose sap smoked in the air, fruits veined with ember-red.

The quest parchment’s rough map guided them toward a valley where, according to a shaky guild scribble, “withering roses sometimes grow (if you don’t die first).”

As they descended, they passed fields of roses already — endless rows of deep crimson and black, thick petals beaded with dew that smoked slightly in the sun.

“Are these them?” Alina asked, awe creeping into her voice despite herself.

Sinthia shook her head. “No. These are bloodshade roses. Good for love potions, poison, and drama. Withering roses are... stranger. Pale centers, dark edges. They never bloom fully. Always look like they’re dying, but never finish.”

“That’s comforting,” Jean said. “Flowers with commitment issues.”

Arken brought them down near a small farmstead on the edge of the fields. Demonic farmers paused, hands still on tools, watching the new arrivals with thinly hidden suspicion.

Sinthia shifted, dropping the last remnants of her human glamor out of politeness. Horns visible. Eyes darker. Tail flicking lazily.

“I’ll ask,” she said. “Locals talk more if they think you actually belong to the neighborhood.”

“And less if they think I’m about to level it,” Arken added.

“Exactly,” she said sweetly. “So be quiet and look pretty.”

He scowled, but stayed put.

Sinthia strode up to the nearest farmer — a broad-shouldered demon woman with small back-swept horns and soil-stained hands.

They exchanged quick, sharp words in demonic — all consonant crunch and velvet threat, seasoned with casual profanity. Sinthia gestured toward the hills, mimed plucking, then tapped the parchment.

The farmer’s mouth thinned. She responded with a longer sentence, voice dropping. Her gaze slid to Arken once, then quickly away.

Sinthia’s eyes narrowed. More back-and-forth. Then, finally, the farmer jerked her chin toward a distant ridge, where the rose fields broke into wild scrub.

Sinthia bowed — actually bowed, which told Arken a lot — then returned.

“Well?” Jean prompted.

“She says withering roses grow wild along that ridge,” Sinthia said. “Most people leave them alone because anything that really likes them tends to be poisonous, cursed, or both.”

“So, business as usual,” Arken said.

“Also,” Sinthia added dryly, “she says if you crack the ground again, she’ll personally feed you to her pigs.”

“That’s fair,” Arken admitted.

They hiked the rest of the way, boots crunching over dark gravel. The sun slanted lower, turning the hills into layers of shadow and ember orange.

It took them the rest of the remaining daylight to find the first one.

Alina spotted it first — a rose nodding at the edge of a rocky outcrop. Its petals were pale at the core, fading to smoke-dark at the edges, every fold looking one bad day

away from collapsing. And yet, despite that almost-dead look, it pulsed faintly with life, the air around it cooler, calmer.

“That’s one,” Jean murmured.

Arken knelt carefully and cut it at the stem with a small, conjured edge of force, more respectful than he’d been with some kings. He cupped the bloom in both hands.

“One,” he echoed.

They found another near a half-dry stream, hiding under a tangle of thorned vines. Seris guided them to it by following the strange temperature ripple it gave the water.

“Two,” Arken said, placing it gently beside the first in the pouch.

The sky was bleeding into purple now. Shadows grew long.

“We won’t get five before dark,” Alina said quietly.

Sinthia brushed hair back from her horns. “We shouldn’t be in the open after sundown here anyway. Night things wake up.”

Arken stared down at the two roses.

Five needed, the parchment had said.

He felt the old grin creeping back before he could stop it.

Jean saw it and groaned. “Oh no. There it is again.”

“What?” Arken said.

“That smile,” Jean said. “The ‘I just realized the universe has a loophole and I want to shove both hands in it’ smile.”

Arken held up one of the roses, turning it slowly between his fingers. The petals shivered but didn’t fall.

“If we only found two,” he mused, “and the quest needs five... I wonder if I can duplicate items.”

There was a tiny beat of silence.

Then Sinthia smirked. “Now *that* is the kind of morally questionable thinking I came here for.”

Alina sighed, but the corner of her mouth betrayed her. “If you blow these up, we’re not going to have any petals left to turn in.”

“I won’t blow them up,” Arken said.

“You say that a lot right before things explode,” Jean pointed out.

Arken’s grin sharpened. “Experiment time.”

Jean threw his hands up. “Elarion, when did you get here?” he said to the sky. “Because this is exactly the face he makes before turning theory into chaos.”

Everyone laughed — tired, nervous, a little unhinged.

Above them, the first stars of Rias winked into sight, indifferent.

Arken tucked the two fragile roses safely away, mind already racing with equations he didn’t need to speak.

Later that night, the valley felt almost gentle.

Arken set up camp the easy way — by cheating.

He pressed his palm to the dark ground and pictured what he wanted: four modern tents, tall enough to stand in, with mosquito screens, thick padding, and enough hooks and shelves that nobody would trip over their own boots. The spell rolled out like a quiet command. Canvas blossomed from air and light, folding itself into shape with neat, efficient snaps.

Jean whistled low. “You know, there was a time we used sticks,” he said. “Dark days.”

“For peasants,” Sinthia sniffed, but she was already poking the flaps, impressed despite herself.

Off to one side, Arken shaped another space — a round basin in the rock, filling smoothly with clear water that glowed faintly green from the Pulse. The liquid hummed with familiar, soothing resonance.

“For you,” he said.

Seris had been patient about the trip, half in water, half in air, but the way her shoulders loosened when she slid into that pool was almost human. The surface wrapped around her like an embrace; her eyes fluttered closed.

“I accept your apology for the dry land,” she murmured. “For now.”

“One less mouth to feed,” Arken muttered with a smile.

“I heard that,” she said, but there was amusement in it, and within moments she had drifted into something like sleep, the water dimming to a steady, calm glow.

Jean slung his pack over one shoulder. “I’ll go see what passes for dinner around here before the nocturnal horrors wake up,” he said. “Sinthia, you’re with me.”

“Oh?” She arched a brow. “You’re finally asking me out?”

“I’m asking you to tell me which animals won’t kill us through a creative curse after we eat them,” he said dryly. “Different kind of date.”

She stretched lazily, tail flicking. “Hunting under a blood-orange sky with a grumpy scholar while my overpowered future husband sets up luxury tents...” She sighed dramatically. “Fine. Romance comes in many forms.”

Alina choked. “Future *what?*”

Sinthia only smiled and sauntered off toward the ridge, cloak swaying. Jean shot Arken a long-suffering look and followed, muttering something about “demons and drama” under his breath.

Their voices faded into the distance.

The valley quieted.

For the first time all day, it was just Arken, Alina, and the whisper of Seris’s pool.

Alina waited until their silhouettes vanished behind a rock outcrop.

Then she moved.

She crossed the space between them in three quick steps, grabbed the front of his shirt, and pushed him gently but firmly back onto one of the bedrolls he’d conjured, landing half on top of him.

“Al—” he started.

“Shh,” she whispered, leaning down so close her breath tickled his ear. “They’re gone. I finally have some peace... and some quality time with you.”

His brain forgot how to sentence.

Heat rushed to his face. His hands hovered awkwardly, then settled at her waist because there was nowhere else to put them that didn’t feel worse.

Alina wrapped her arms around him and pulled him in, letting his head rest against her chest. Her heartbeat thumped steady under his ear, warm and real in a way that had nothing to do with magic.

For a guy who’d spent a whole previous life falling asleep to fan noise and blue screens, the sound was... devastating.

Indecent thoughts crowded in, sure. He was still human. But they were drowned out by something quieter and deeper — that simple animal comfort of being held like he was allowed to exist.

Something in his chest unclenched that hadn’t relaxed since the rooftop.

Alina refused to move. She tightened her hold a little, chin resting on his hair, like she was afraid he might float away if she let go.

Neither of them said anything for a long time.

Arken breathed in the scent of her — soap, earth, fried food from earlier, a faint thread of something sharp and green like crushed leaves. Every exhale brushed his cheek with the rise and fall of her ribs.

“...thank you,” he said finally, voice small but honest, the words dragging something out of him with them. “For this. For... all of it.”

Alina huffed a tiny laugh that trembled at the edges. “I’m seducing a god,” she murmured. “I feel way too good about myself right now.”

He snorted into her shirt. “You’ve been holding this back for so long,” he said. “Why?”

Her fingers curled in his hair, gentle. “Because I’m shy,” she admitted. “Because every time I even thought about it, there were eyes everywhere. Scholars, queens, demons, sea-ladies, guild clerks. And you...”

She hesitated.

“And me?” he asked softly.

“You keep nearly dying and saving continents,” she said. “Hard to find a quiet moment to be selfish when the sky’s shaking.”

He laughed under his breath. “I love this,” he said. “You. This. All of it. You could’ve done this months ago.”

Her reply was cut short by a yell from down the valley, carried on the wind:

“NO FAIR! THAT’S WHY YOU DIDN’T COME HUNTING!”

Sinthia.

Alina chuckled, shoulders shaking, and — out of sheer petty spite — hugged him closer, pressing him harder against her. Arken made a small strangled noise that was absolutely not dignified.

“Mine for now,” she murmured.

In the distance, Sinthia’s voice pitched higher. “I swear on every horn on this continent, if you start without me—”

“Not starting anything!” Arken shouted back automatically, which was probably the least reassuring thing he could’ve said.

By the time Jean and Sinthia broke through the treeline with a carcass slung between them, Alina had slid off him with suspiciously innocent speed.

Dinner was fast and messy — fire, smoke, demon spices that made Arken’s eyes water in a good way. Seris surfaced once to comment that “land food still smells strange” and then submerged again.

When the embers died low and the stars thickened overhead, everyone drifted toward their tents.

Sinthia, of course, aimed for mischief.

She sidled up to Arken with her cloak slipping off one shoulder, fingers tugging at the neckline with theatrical slowness. “You know,” she purred, “if we’re doing ‘quality time,’ I am *very* available for—”

Jean grabbed her by the back of the cloak like she was an unruly cat. “At least let me get to my tent before you start shedding layers,” he said flatly. “I do not need trauma on top of mana saturation.”

She pouted. “You’re no fun.”

“You can be indecent *after* I am safely elsewhere,” he said, dragging her toward the far tent.

Alina, cheeks still pink, pretended to be busy rearranging blankets. She rolled out a bed for herself right next to Arken’s, carefully close but not touching, like she was drawing a line she intended to ignore later.

Sinthia eventually flopped into her own tent with a loud sigh, muttering something about “next time I’m staking my claim first.”

Seris’s pool glowed a calm, sleepy green.

The valley settled into the kind of quiet that only happens far from cities — insect hum, distant night calls, the soft creak of cooling stone.

Arken lay on his back, staring up at the tent ceiling, listening to Alina’s breathing in the dark.

For the first time in a long time, he felt both completely exposed and weirdly safe.

Outside, two women who could break nations slept with one eye metaphorically open — one out of habit, one out of jealousy.

Sinthia would not let this “alone time” go unchallenged next time.

And tomorrow?

Tomorrow they were going to see if the laws of this world were ready for a god-tier nerd to start duplicating legendary flowers.

Chapter 32 — Infinite Rose Glitch

Nobody understood what Arken had muttered about an “infinite rose glitch” last night, so they’d all politely ignored it.

Arken, unfortunately, could not.

He barely slept. Every time he drifted off, his brain spat out numbers and loops — if one rare item could become two, two could become four, four could become eight... He'd broken enough games in his last life to recognize the itch when it showed up.

By dawn, he gave up on pretending to rest.

He slipped out of the tent, stretched in the cold Demon-continent morning, and stared at the two withering roses tucked carefully in a conjured glass case. They were duller than last night. Magic clung to them like tired perfume.

"Not for long," he murmured.

Behind him, canvas rustled.

Alina emerged first, hair sleep-mussed, wrapped in a cloak. "You're up early," she yawned. "Again."

Sinthia staggered out next, shirt half buttoned, horns askew. "If this is about roses and not cuddling," she said blearily, "I feel personally attacked."

Jean followed, already fully dressed because of course he was. Seris rose from the pool with a smooth ripple, water clinging to her like a second skin.

Arken turned, eyes too awake. "Good. You're all up. Watch this."

That tone made Jean squint. "Oh no," he said. "He's got the 'I just thought of something terrible' face."

Arken dismissed the tents with a thought — canvas folding into nothing, bedrolls popping out of existence, Seris's pool shrinking into a neat, glowing puddle that slid back into the earth like it had never been.

"Show-off," Sinthia muttered, but her tail flicked in appreciation.

"Circle up," Arken said.

They did, more out of curiosity than obedience.

He held one of the withering roses in his palm. Closed his fingers. Let his mana snare every detail — stem length, petal count, the exact way the wilting magic wrapped it.

Then he whispered, mostly to himself, "Copy. Paste."

A second rose appeared in his other hand. Identical down to the smallest bruise on the petals.

Alina gasped. “Arken—”

He grinned, feral. “Oh, we’re not done.”

Two became four.

Four became six.

He stopped there on purpose, because the part of him that remembered fried GPUs and crashed game saves whispered that testing infinity on day one was how you bricked worlds.

When the light faded, he stood in the middle of the circle with six identical withering roses cradled in a conjured tray, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

The others just... stared.

Jean pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay,” he said slowly. “So we’ve moved from ‘breaking magical measurement devices’ to ‘committing economic war crimes.’ Good to know.”

Sinthia’s eyes were huge, pupils blown wide. “Do you know what people in Rias would *do* for that kind of duplication?” she breathed. “Do you know what *I* would do for that kind of—”

“Stop right there,” Jean said sharply.

She pouted. “You never let me finish my sentences.”

“Your sentences are crimes waiting to happen,” he replied.

Alina edged closer, peering at the tray. “Are they... illusions?”

“Check,” Arken said, offering one.

She plucked a rose, turning it between her fingers. Thorns pricked her skin — a tiny bead of blood welling up. She winced, then narrowed her eyes.

“It feels real,” she murmured.

Seris leaned in, damp hair dripping, and inhaled gently. “The magic signature matches,” she said. “Same age, same withering pattern, same trace of whoever originally touched it.” She gave Arken a look that was half awe, half warning. “You did not create a fake. You *rewrote scarcity*.”

Jean exhaled like someone whose day had already been too long, and the sun wasn’t fully up. “I’m ready to go home,” he said. “I’ve seen enough abominations before breakfast.”

Alina elbowed him. “He’s excited,” she translated.

Jean snorted. “I’m terrified,” he corrected. “That’s scholar for ‘excited.’”

Sinthia sidled closer to Arken, eyes glittering. “So,” she purred, “if you can copy rare roses... what else can you copy? Gold? Jewels? Extra handsome versions of yourself just for me—”

“Breakfast,” Arken said loudly, cutting her off. “Breakfast and then city. We turn in the quest properly. No infinite money glitching until Jean stops making that face.”

“This *is* my relaxed face,” Jean said.

“No it isn’t,” Alina and Sinthia said in unison.

They chose to walk the last stretch.

Flying directly over a demon capital with a demon defector in the party felt like... calling for artillery.

The road to the city climbed gently, carved into black stone that drank in the morning light. Ahead, the demon capital rose like a dark jewel — towers of obsidian and glass, bridges strung between spires, lanterns still burning with soft red glow even in daylight. The walls weren’t just stone; they were layered wards that shimmered faintly if you looked too long.

As the city loomed, Arken slowed.

“Okay,” he said. “One more thing before we get within stabbing distance of politics.”

He lifted his hand.

The protective script he'd hammered into himself back when his own sickness almost broke him rose to the surface of his awareness — layers of defense, auto-healing, anti-curse routines, quiet little if-this-then-that rules humming along his skin.

"Copy," he whispered. "Paste. Target: party."

Invisible lines snapped outward.

Alina shivered. "Did you just—"

A faint shell shimmered around each of them for a heartbeat — like thin glass catching the light — then vanished to normal sight.

Arken blinked.

Information bloomed at the edge of his vision — four soft glyphs hovering just outside his direct focus. Each one pulsed with a heartbeat, tiny bars flickering beside them: one for physical strain, one for mana, one for... emotional volatility?

Name tags snapped into place without him really thinking about it.

ALINA — HP: 98% / MP: 22% / MOOD: FLUSTERED

SINTHIA — HP: 100% / MP: 91% / MOOD: PREDATORY

JEAN — HP: 97% / MP: 84% / MOOD: CONCERNED

SERIS — HP: 100% / MP: 100% / MOOD: CONTENT (SUBMERGED)

Arken's eyes went wide. "Okay that's—"

"Arken?" Alina asked. "You're making that 'new toy' face again."

He swallowed, forcing himself not to stare directly at the HUD. "Nothing. Just... quality-of-life features. You're all under my protection now. More than before."

Sinthia smirked. "I was already under you in my heart," she said. "But I accept the upgrade."

Jean pretended he hadn't heard that. "As long as it stops us from being turned into political hostages," he said, "I'll take whatever other weird side effects you baked in."

"I didn't bake anything weird," Arken protested.

The HUD politely updated JEAN — MOOD: SKEPTICAL.

They crested the last rise.

The gate stood before them — a massive arch of dark stone flanked by spiked towers. Ten guards waited there in full formal armor, horns polished, cloaks edged in crimson. Their weapons hummed faintly with enchantments, runes etched along blades and hafts.

Sinthia's hair rose slightly along her neck, like a cat's fur bristling.

"Those aren't regular gate guards," she murmured, stepping in front of Alina and Arken without even thinking. "Those are Shadow Lancers. High palace security. What are *they* doing here?"

The answer walked forward: one of the Lancers, armor trimmed in gold.

"By decree of Her Majesty, Queen Seraith," he said, voice carrying easily, "you will come with us. The Queen is expecting you."

"Charming," Jean muttered. "Nothing like 'come with us' to start a relationship."

Arken's stomach knotted.

His aura tightened around him... then slipped.

Just a little. Just a hair.

To him, it felt like a sigh.

To the nearest demons, it felt like a minor god dropping a hand on their shoulder.

Guards stiffened. A child passing by in the crowd wobbled and sat down hard on the cobblestones, eyes wide. Somewhere in the market beyond the gate, someone dropped a tray with a clatter.

Focus, Arken told himself, forcing the pressure inward. He imagined a lid snapping shut over a boiling pot, imagined Elarion's stern face and the queen of Zeno's cool gaze.

The weight eased.

Sinthia was still in front of him, shoulders tense, eyes moving constantly — counting guards, measuring windows, calculating distances. He had never seen her this serious. No flirt, no smirk, just sharp, professional paranoia.

They walked.

Through the gate. Into the city.

Demon architecture hit Arken like a whole different game zone — steep roofs, hanging lanterns in reds and purples, streets thrumming with life and danger in equal measure. Glamours flickered at the edges of his sight, masks over horns and tails as citizens moved about their business pretending this was all normal.

It wasn't.

Eyes followed them everywhere.

Sinthia spoke low without moving her lips. "We have the whole city watching us now."

"Yeah," Arken said quietly. "I noticed."

Jean's HUD pinged — MOOD: TENSE.

"You wanted to talk to the Queen," he reminded Arken under his breath. "This is... technically that."

"Yeah. I was hoping for less 'parade of possible assassins' and more 'awkward tea,' but sure," Arken replied.

The escort wound through courtyards and up wide stairs until the palace loomed above them — a great fortress of black glass and carved stone, every surface etched with wards and sigils that murmured as Arken passed, like hundreds of eyes opening and closing.

They entered the throne hall.

Arken braced for arrogance.

He got... something else.

Queen Seraith didn't stay sitting.

She stood the moment he crossed the threshold, silk whispering around her like smoke. Her horns were small but sharply curved, polished obsidian adorned with delicate chains. Her eyes — slit-pupiled and crimson — flicked over the group, landed on Arken, and went very, very still.

Then she bowed.

Not deeply — demons did not throw themselves on the floor for anyone — but enough that the court sucked in a collective breath.

It wasn't a political bow.

It was a *recognition* bow.

Like someone acknowledging a celestial event that happened to walk through their front door.

"My Lord is here," she said quietly. "At last."

Alina stiffened at Arken's side. Seris, half-present in the moisture in the air, stirred.

Arken felt extremely like a guy in borrowed clothes who had no idea what to do with divine reverence.

"...hi," he said weakly.

Seraith straightened, mask sliding back into place. That flash of naked awe vanished, replaced by a razor smile and lazy confidence.

"Forgive the abrupt escort," she said aloud, voice carrying to the hall. "And the... previous misunderstandings, regarding my agents."

"You mean when they tried to kill or kidnap us?" Jean said under his breath.

Alina folded her arms, temper finally spilling. "Yeah, of course you're sorry," she snapped. "Now that he's walking apocalypse with legs."

That hit something.

The Queen's head turned slowly toward Alina.

For a breath, the air *compressed*.

No spell. No chant. Just presence.

Pure, predatory focus.

Sinthia dropped to one knee, hand at her throat, gagging like the room had swallowed all its air. Her tail lashed once, then went completely still.

Arken's HUD screamed: SINTHIA — HP: 97% / MP: 88% / MOOD: PANIC.

He moved without thinking.

He stepped between Seraith and his party, one hand reaching back to haul Sinthia gently but firmly to her feet. “Hey,” he said, voice low. “You okay?”

She swallowed hard, sweat beading at her hairline. “Fine,” she lied. “Just... old instincts.” Her eyes flicked to the Queen’s and away again like looking at the sun.

Arken turned back to Seraith, aura tightening around his ribs like armor.

“If you want something from me,” he said, steady now, “start by telling me what you’re doing. What’s your goal?”

Her lips curved.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she drawled. “You think I’m going to go to bed with you right after we’ve just sat down to lunch? You’re deluded.”

Alina choked. Jean made a small strangled noise that might have been a cough. Sinthia, still pale, managed a tiny, traitorous, “Iconic.”

Arken’s brain skipped a frame. “That’s... not what I asked,” he said, ears burning.

“Exactly,” Seraith replied. The smirk faded, and something sharper slid in behind her eyes. “If you wish to understand me, we start with conversation, not demands. Come.”

She turned, cloak swirling, and gestured.

Guards stepped aside as doors opened onto a long dining hall.

The smell hit them first — rich, savory, roasted.

On the central table, platters of meat steamed beside bowls of glossy vegetables and dark bread. Wine glimmered in crystal. At each place, a thick cut of steak sat waiting, seared to perfection, juices pooling.

Arken’s stomach rumbled.

Then his brain caught up.

The mana signature in the meat was... familiar.

He stared.

Seraith followed his gaze and smiled. “You knocked it out,” she said. “Would have been a waste to leave it for scavengers.”

The T-rex.

The colossal predator he'd bounced off his chest yesterday.

He felt a flash of anger — something tight and childish and weirdly protective that surprised even him.

Then he forced himself to breathe.

There were other monsters. Other lives. The bond had been seconds long at best. And people here lived off what they could kill.

He unclenched his jaw and sat.

"Fine," he said quietly. "So. You've been watching us this whole time, then?"

"Only since you stepped onto my continent," Seraith replied, taking her seat at the head of the table with the lazy grace of someone who had never doubted she belonged on a throne. "I have eyes and ears everywhere. How do you think I rose to the top?"

Sinthia snorted softly. "She's not exaggerating," she muttered. "If a citizen sneezes with too much mana flare in the wrong alley, she knows before the cough finishes."

"Comforting," Jean said dryly.

Sinthia glanced at him. "Welcome to Rias," she said. "Paranoia is a civic virtue."

Arken drummed his fingers against the table once. "So now the whole city's watching us," he said.

Sinthia nodded. "Windows. Wards. Half these forks are probably listening."

"Yeah," Arken replied. "I noticed."

Jean shot him a sideways look. "And yet here we are," he said. "Sitting at the table like sane people instead of running for our lives."

"Running wouldn't help," Seris said calmly from the water pitcher, her voice a soft ripple. "Not while your curiosity still outweighs your fear."

She wasn't wrong.

Seraith raised her glass.

“To new guests,” she said. “To dangerous possibilities. And to the first honest conversation this continent has had with a god in eight hundred years.”

Glasses were raised, some hands more steady than others.

The meat steamed.

The city watched.

And somewhere under the table, Arken’s fingers curled just once, as he weighed truth against danger and wondered which way to break the game first.

Chapter 33 — Terms & Conditions May Apply

The steak was good.

That was the annoying part.

Arken had braced for “evil demon feast” — something spiky or glowing or obviously cursed. Instead, the meat was perfectly seared, charred at the edges, tender at the center. The kind of thing that would’ve made his old coworkers shut up for ten entire minutes.

He cut a bite, stared at it, then quietly set his fork down.

The hall was watching.

Not just the guards, not just the servants along the walls — the whole room was tuned to them. Glamoured courtiers pretended to drink, but their eyes tracked every breath. Wards webbed the ceiling in faint red lines, flexing slightly when Arken’s aura brushed them like a storm front.

Queen Seraith seemed perfectly at ease.

She lounged at the head of the table, one leg crossed over the other, goblet resting in long, ringed fingers. Up close, she was worse — or better — than the throne-room impression. Beauty sharpened to a weapon. Horns like polished night. Smile like she’d already read the ending of this story and was enjoying the middle bits.

“So,” she said, breaking the silence with a soft clink of glass. “You wanted to talk to me.”

Her gaze slid over Alina, Sinthia, Jean, Seris — then settled back on Arken like a hand returning to its favorite knife.

“Here I am,” she added. “Talk.”

Arken met her eyes.

Every instinct told him to joke, to dodge, to deflect with a half-smile and some self-deprecating nonsense.

He didn’t.

“I’m tired of waiting to see who tries to kidnap Sinthia next,” he said. “Or who thinks grabbing me, or the people around me, is a good idea. I don’t want to live with one side of the planet always waiting for a chance to slit my throat for parts.”

The hall went still in a different way — quieter, heavier.

Seraith’s smile didn’t vanish, but it cooled. “Direct,” she said. “I appreciate that.”

“I’m serious,” Arken continued. “I know I look like a walking bug report to half your mages. I know what I am to strategists. But I’m not... an infinite resource you can poke and measure forever. I get tired. I get sick. I can still get stabbed if my brain isn’t paying attention.”

He hesitated, fingers curling loosely on the table.

“In my last world,” he said quietly, “I died because I pushed my body until it broke. I didn’t listen when it screamed. I don’t want to repeat that with your assassins as the background music.”

Alina looked at him sharply. Jean’s eyes softened for half a heartbeat. Sinthia’s tail stilled.

Seraith watched him like she was taking notes in ink no one else could see.

“You think I ordered your death,” she said mildly. “Interesting.”

“You sent Sinthia,” he pointed out. “You ran spies on Yoatha. You knew about me the moment my aura spiked. You’ve been watching us since we stepped onto this continent. If you haven’t sent anyone yet, it’s because you’re still deciding if I’m more useful as a puzzle than as a sacrifice.”

The queen’s lashes flickered.

Across the table, a man in black and gold armor shifted — some high-ranking officer, hand twitching near his sword hilt.

Jean's new HUD politely labeled him in Arken's peripheral vision:

UNKNOWN — HP: 100% / MP: 76% / MOOD: HOSTILE (SUPPRESSED)

It was almost comforting, having numbers on the tension.

Seraith took a slow sip of wine, set the goblet down, and finally dropped the pretense.

“Fine,” she said. “Honesty for honesty.”

She leaned forward slightly, eyes bright.

“When the reports reached me — a human with an aura like a collapsed star, detection spells failing, sea spirits bowing, elves hauling you to their heart-trees — I assumed two things. One: if I ignored you, someone stupider would grab at you and trigger a war I didn’t start. Two: if I attacked you, I might live just long enough to realize I’d made a mistake.”

“Reassuring,” Jean murmured.

“So, I sent Sinthia.” Seraith flicked a glance at the demon spy, who sat rigid and very awake at Arken’s side. “Not to kill you. To infiltrate, observe, and catalog. Worst case, she dies and I learn how you kill. Best case, you like her. Seems we landed closer to best.”

Sinthia opened her mouth, thought about something wildly inappropriate, and for once closed it again.

Arken didn’t smile.

“Observation is one thing,” he said. “Building a whole kidnapping pipeline behind that is another.”

Seraith tilted her head. “And what makes you think we did?”

“The part where Sinthia got snatched,” Arken replied. “By people trying to sell her back or trade her up. The part where rumor keeps painting me as a weapon and a prize. If you didn’t order that, it means your own house is leaking. Either way, I don’t like it.”

That hit something different.

For a heartbeat, the queen didn't look amused or predatory. She looked... annoyed. Offended, even.

"Of course my house leaks," she said. "It's made of demons. Ambition is in the mortar. You do not rule Rias by pretending everyone loves you. You rule by making it very, very expensive to come at you directly."

Her gaze sharpened again.

"You are right to be wary," she added. "You are also right to be tired. You are not a bottomless well, even if your mana is. So."

She tapped one painted nail lightly against the table.

"What do you want, specifically?" she asked. "What would make you feel safe enough to stop looking over your shoulder every time the wind changes?"

Arken exhaled.

He'd been tumbling vague wants in his head for days: no more kidnappings, no more spies on Alina's roof, no demon war fleets waiting for him to sneeze wrong.

Now he tried to phrase it like code.

"I want a guarantee," he said slowly, "that as far as Rias is concerned, I'm under your protection, not your procurement list. That anyone who tries to use me, or the people I care about, as leverage will be treated like they just tried to poison your throne."

He paused.

"And I want Sinthia off whatever leash you think you still have her on," he added. "If she wants to go back, she can. If she wants to stay with me, that's her choice, not a long-term assignment."

Something moved in Sinthia's expression — surprise, then something soft, then something hungry that had nothing to do with food.

Seraith looked between them, weighing.

"You make large asks, Green Pulse," she said.

"You keep calling me a god," Arken said. "Might as well shoot big."

Alina kicked him under the table. He coughed.

Jean cleared his throat. “From a geopolitical perspective,” he said, sliding smoothly in before anyone could threaten to seduce anyone else again, “formalizing him as a protected asset rather than a contested one is smart. If Rias declares him under royal aegis, any demon faction that moves against him is openly defying you. That’s a useful line in the sand.”

“And what do I get?” Seraith asked. “Besides fewer idiots setting themselves on fire near your aura.”

“You get me not crashing your entire economy by duplicating whatever I feel like,” Arken said, a little too honestly.

The room went very quiet.

Jean closed his eyes briefly. “Subtle,” he murmured.

Seraith stared at him.

Her eyes flicked to the roses at Alina’s belt — the quest flowers they’d technically already over-fulfilled. Her mind was fast; he could almost see the calculations.

“You can do that,” she said softly. It wasn’t a question.

Arken shrugged one shoulder. “I won’t,” he said. “Not recklessly. That’s my point. I don’t want to destabilize your world. I just want to live in it without treating every corridor like a boss arena.”

Silence stretched.

Finally, the queen laughed.

It wasn’t mocking. It was bright, sharp, almost delighted.

“An overpowered anomaly with restraint,” she said. “Do you have any idea how rare that is? My nobles throw tantrums over losing one trade caravan. My midline mages would burn a village to test a new glyph. And here you are, capable of bankrupting half my great houses overnight, asking for… peace.”

Arken’s ears went hot. “Peace and the ability to smack someone if they try something,” he said. “I’m not that saintly.”

“Sainthood is overrated,” Seraith said dryly.

She steepled her fingers.

“Very well,” she said. “Here is my counter-offer.”

The hall leaned in.

“I will issue a royal edict,” she said. “Effective immediately: Arken of Yoatha, bearer of the Green Pulse, is recognized as ‘Extenuating Sovereign Asset’—”

Jean choked. “That’s not a title, that’s a threat.”

“—under my direct patronage,” Seraith continued smoothly. “Any demon who attempts to harm, bind, or traffic him or his declared household members will be treated as a traitor to the crown. Their estates will be seized. Their line will be outlawed. Their names will be struck from our ledgers.”

Murmurs rippled through the watching nobles.

Arken’s HUD ticked several MOOD values from CURIOUS to ALARMED.

“In exchange,” the queen went on, gaze never leaving his, “you will not use your... duplication gift to flood the market or collapse existing infrastructures. If you want something on a large scale, you come to me and we design it together so no one starves when your miracles make their craft obsolete.”

She lifted a brow.

“And when — not if — the things your aura has awakened crawl out of whatever holes they were sleeping in,” she added, “you will answer my summons when I ask for your help dealing with them. Not as a weapon. As... a colleague. A fellow disaster manager.”

The title made something in him unclench.

Disaster manager. Not hero. Not god. Just someone trying to keep the worst from happening.

He could live with that.

“Sinthia?” he asked.

Seraith finally turned her full attention to the spy.

“For the record,” she said conversationally, “why are you still at his side?”

Every eye at the table swung to Sinthia.

She straightened, tail flicking once, then stilled. Her usual smirk failed her. For a heartbeat she looked younger, less like a legendary temptress and more like someone caught halfway between two homes.

“Because I chose him,” she said simply.

“And because he’s hot,” her mouth added, unhelpfully. “And overpowered. And the first person who treated me like a person before a pawn.”

Alina’s jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

Seraith studied her for a long, quiet moment.

“Then your leash is yours,” she said at last. “You’re off my assignments, Sinthia. If you stay, you stay as you, not as my wire to his heart.”

Sinthia swallowed. “You’re just... letting me go?” she asked.

The queen smiled, small and sharp. “I have spies to spare,” she said. “I do not have another Arken. Or another Seris. Or another Jean. Or,” she added, gaze flicking to Alina, “another mortal who can stand in his storm without dissolving.”

Alina blinked, thrown.

Seris’ voice curled lazily from the water. “You miscounted,” she said. “You do not have another me anywhere.”

“Of course not, darling,” Seraith said. “You terrify even the sea.”

Jean finally spoke up again, rubbing his temples. “So if I’m hearing this correctly,” he said, “we’re walking out of here with royal demon protection, an implied job offer to help with future world-ending nonsense, and a promise we won’t accidentally crash your banking system.”

“And free steak,” Sinthia added.

“Don’t forget the free steak,” Arken said weakly.

Seraith laughed again, softer this time.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “we will discuss the withering roses. The mana rot under my borders. The fact that something in the deep trenches is waking up angry, and even Seris pretends not to hear it.”

Seris' eyes narrowed, but she didn't deny it.

"Tonight," the queen finished, "you will stay in guest chambers under my wards, not in a campsite where every bandit with a half-baked ritual thinks he can snatch glory. Eat. Rest. Try not to seduce anyone in the corridors; half my staff are very susceptible."

Her gaze flicked meaningfully between Arken and Sinthia, then to Alina, who turned the color of her own hair.

"Hey, I didn't do anything," Arken protested.

Seraith's eyes glinted. "That," she said, "is exactly what worries me."

Servants began moving again — refilling glasses, bringing bread, easing the hall back into motion. The tight wire of danger didn't snap, but it shifted — less "immediate execution," more "ongoing high-stakes negotiation."

Arken let out a slow breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

His body was still mortal. His heart still beat too fast. His brain still muttered about possible betrayals and loopholes.

But for the first time since he'd learned the demons knew his name, the threat in his head had a shape he could point at.

An edict. A pact. A queen who wanted him alive and cooperative more than she wanted him in pieces.

It wasn't perfect.

Nothing ever was.

But it was a start.

He picked up his fork again.

"Okay," he murmured, more to himself than anyone. "Step one: don't get assassinated by dinner. Step two: help demons fix their apocalypse. Step three: maybe, eventually... breathe."

Across the table, Seraith raised her glass in a small, private toast.

"To dangerous men who are tired," she said softly, just loud enough for him to hear. "They're the ones who change the world without meaning to."

Arken clinked his water glass against hers.

“Let’s try not to break it by accident this time,” he said.

For once, the queen of demons looked like she genuinely agreed.

Next is consequences + roses + looming abyss  

Let’s roll.

Chapter 34 — Red Sky, Rotten Roots

The guest chambers of Rias were nicer than Arken’s old apartment had ever dreamed of being.

High ceilings, red glass windows pouring warm light, a bed big enough to land a medium-sized dragon on, and more pillows than he’d had friends in his last life.

Didn’t help him sleep.

He lay on his back, staring at the carved ceiling while his new layers of protection hummed quietly under his skin — spells nested over spells, all set to trigger the moment his body so much as thought about getting sick again. Subtle, precise, self-maintaining.

His mana didn’t get tired.

He did.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” Arken said, voice low.

Alina slipped inside.

She’d changed into demon-guest-lent clothes — soft dark tunic, loose pants, hair brushed out and falling down her back like a forest at night. She closed the door carefully, as if not to disturb anything that was barely holding together.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Define ‘okay,’” he said. “Not dead. Not kidnapped. Officially demon-queen-certified ‘Extenuating Sovereign Asset.’ Whatever that means.”

She padded over and sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at him.

“It means she’s terrified to lose you and obstinate enough not to say it plainly,” Alina said. “I kind of respect it.”

He huffed a little laugh. “Jealous?”

Alina made a face. “Of her? No. Of the ten thousand guards and wards between you and literally anyone else? Maybe.”

She hesitated, then lay down beside him on top of the blanket, facing the ceiling too. Their shoulders almost touched.

“What you said in there,” she murmured, “about not wanting to die from pushing yourself again... I didn’t know you thought about it that way.”

“I try not to,” he said. “Brain likes reruns, though.”

Silence settled for a beat. Somewhere outside, distant demon-city noises drifted up — laughing, music, the clatter of hooves on stone.

“Do you...” Alina started, then stopped. Tried again. “Do you regret coming here? To this world?”

He turned his head to look at her.

Her eyes were open, fixed on the ceiling, but her throat was tight.

“I regret how I left the other one,” he said quietly. “I don’t regret finding you on a roof.”

Color climbed her cheeks. “Smooth,” she muttered.

“Accidentally smooth,” he corrected. “Don’t give me too much credit.”

She smiled despite herself.

Before either of them could decide whether this was about to become a Moment, the door slammed open.

“ARKEN,” Sinthia announced, already halfway in. “I had a nightmare that you were having emotional development without me, and—”

She stopped.

Took in the picture: Arken and Alina lying side by side on the massive bed, both fully clothed but absolutely in cuddle radius.

Slow, delighted grin.

“Oh,” she purred. “Ohhhh. Am I interrupting? Please say yes, it makes it better.”

Alina sat up so fast she nearly head-butted Arken. “We were talking,” she snapped, cheeks blazing.

“Your hair says ‘talking.’ Your heartbeat says ‘about to do terrible, wonderful decisions,’” Sinthia said cheerfully as she sauntered in. Tonight’s “sleepwear” was absolutely not approved by any sane dress code — silky, short, and cut in ways that would’ve gotten her kicked out of most temples.

“Can you not—” Arken started.

“No,” she said, smug. “I am constitutionally incapable of ‘not.’ Also, your aura tastes different when you’re flustered and I am a scientist.”

She hopped onto the bed on his other side without asking, sprawling like a cat that owned the place. Arken suddenly had one dangerously comfortable woman on each side and the distinct feeling his shields needed a “social situations” upgrade.

“Don’t you have your own room?” Alina hissed.

“I came to check on our walking miracle,” Sinthia said. “He overclocked his mortality again. Also, the palace staff are gossiping about how the queen looked at him like dessert and I wanted to mark territory.”

“Excuse me?” Arken squeaked.

“Metaphorical territory,” Sinthia added hastily. “For now.”

Alina pinched the bridge of her nose. “You were worse when he was sick,” she muttered. “Like the charm aura flipped your filter off.”

Sinthia snorted. “Honey, my filter died in childhood.”

She shifted, propping herself up on her elbows to stare at Arken more seriously.

“Jokes aside,” she said, tail flicking lazily, “you scared me, you know. When you went down. For a second I thought—”

Her voice caught. She covered it instantly with a smirk.

“—I thought, ‘wow, if he dies before I corrupt him properly, what a waste,’” she finished.

Arken rolled his eyes. “Very on brand.”

Alina watched both of them, expression softening just a fraction.

“Get some sleep,” she said finally, sliding off the bed. “Both of you. Queen Demonstress said tomorrow we hear about the roses and the trenches and whatever else is rotting under this place.”

She paused at the door, hand on the latch.

“Arken?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t try to fix everything in one day,” she said. “Let the world be heavy in shifts. We can carry some of it too.”

He swallowed.

“Deal,” he said.

She smiled, small but real, and left.

Sinthia waited exactly three seconds before collapsing dramatically across his chest.

“Ow,” Arken wheezed. “Ribs are still mortal.”

“You’ll live,” she said, chin resting over his heart. “You always do. Try not to get yourself kingship-lynched tomorrow, okay? Demons don’t handle saviors well. We either worship them or eat them.”

“Comforting,” he muttered.

She closed her eyes, already half-dozing.

“Hey, Arken?” she mumbled.

“Yeah?”

“If she ever wants to leave,” Sinthia said sleepily, “or if this world ever treats her like it treated you... promise me you’ll break it before it breaks her.”

He stared at the ceiling again.

“...I already planned on it,” he said softly.

Seris’ voice drifted from the jug of enchanted water in the corner — tired, amused, fond.

“You threaten my Master with poetry and I’ll drag this continent under,” she yawned.
“Sleep, all of you. The deep is loud tonight.”

The wards hummed.

Arken’s shields flexed gently around his nerves.

Eventually, he slept.

Morning came in red-gold.

Demon palaces didn’t do “soft wake-ups.” A chime sounded somewhere in the walls — low, melodic, threaded with subtle magic that told the body it was probably a good idea to stop being horizontal now.

Arken stretched, automatically checking his HUD:

HP: Full. Mana: pointless to measure. Exhaustion: low. Shields: stable.

Sinthia had migrated in the night to her own half of the bed, one leg thrown over a pillow like she was strangling it.

Alina was nowhere in sight; he suspected she’d punished herself by waking early to train. Jean would be awake reading something he wasn’t supposed to have access to. Seris... the water spirit was already whispering with the palace fountains, sending gossip ripples through Rias’ plumbing.

They met in the hall outside, dressed and oddly formal.

The walk to the war room felt longer than it was.

Rias' inner corridors were layered with illusions — windows that showed impossible landscapes, walls that occasionally melted into murals of past battles. Arken's aura brushed against glamours and wards in constant, quiet tests; his shields filtered most of it into background static.

No one talked much.

They entered together.

The war room was a circle — always a circle, because demons hated the idea of someone having a better angle. A huge table took up the center, carved from something black and smooth that drank light. Maps were projected above it in faint red, lines of territory and mana flows pulsing gently.

Queen Seraith stood at the far side, hands on the table, head bowed as she listened to a report from a hornless scribe. High officers flanked her: armored, grim, more scars than jewelry.

As Arken's group approached, the low drone of voices faded.

"Good," Seraith said without turning. "You're on time. I would've been offended if you slept through the apocalypse."

"Threat level?" Jean asked, all business now, scholar eyes locked on the maps.

Seraith gestured, and the projection zoomed toward a section of Demon territories: rolling plains, a cluster of farming villages, then a dark stain at the edge where the land broke off into jagged cliffs.

"The withering roses," she said. "Once, they only grew along this canyon — a freak, beautiful adaptation. Low light, high mana, perfect for medicines and some of our more... recreational concoctions." A faint smirk at that.

The smirk died.

"Six months ago," she continued, "they started dying at the roots. Not from drought. Not from blight. From mana burn. Their internal channels charred from the inside out. Pure energy overload."

Arken's stomach dropped. "That's... not normal," he said brilliantly.

"No," Jean muttered.

Seraith flicked her fingers and red marks spread from the canyon like cracks.

“Now the corruption is spreading,” she said. “Outward. The soil around the canyon is going sterile in pulses. Creatures that drink from those roots come away twisted or... emptied. And in the nights since your Pulse, we’ve recorded tremors from deeper than any of my geomancers can sound.”

Seris’ watery eyes narrowed.

“The trench below the canyon,” she murmured. “You never told us demons had been tapping that close.”

“You never asked,” Seraith shot back, then sighed. “Our assumption was that some old sleeping thing was being nudged too hard by the roses’ mana draw. Then your existence happened, and I have to consider that whatever remembers you down there may also be stirring.”

Arken rubbed the back of his neck. “So your roses are burning from the inside because something is... pushing back?”

“Or pulling,” Jean said softly. “If the deep has started draining raw mana to compensate, anything rooted in that channel is going to fry.”

The queen looked between them.

“This is where you come in,” she said to Arken. “You wanted a way to keep Sinthia, yourself, and your immediate orbit off every kidnapper’s wish list? Fix the thing rotting my border. Publicly. Under my eye. Let the continent see you as someone who stands with Rias against the deep, not someone we’re all scrambling to dissect.”

Alina folded her arms. “And if he’s the reason it woke in the first place?” she asked bluntly.

“Then he’s the only one who can talk it back to sleep,” Seraith replied, just as blunt. “Or punch it into behaving. I’m not picky about methodology as long as my people live.”

Arken stared at the map.

A part of him — the old raid leader brain wired for boss phases and mechanics — woke up in the back of his skull. Edge of rot. Trench below. Unknown entity. Mana burn as AoE DoT. Roses as indicators.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “What’s the plan?”

Seraith smiled, sharp and satisfied.

“Plan is simple,” she said. “You, your little disaster party, and a small escort of my best go to the canyon. You look. You listen. You do whatever it is you do when the world stops making sense.”

“Panic quietly,” Arken said.

“After that,” Seraith went on, ignoring him, “we see if the roses can be stabilized. If not, we evacuate the region before the ground under it decides to follow them into oblivion.”

Jean leaned over the map, fingers tracing the spreading circles. “We’ll need to test the mana-density gradient,” he muttered. “See if the burn is uniform or pulsing. If it’s reacting to his presence, we’ll know as soon as we cross the threshold.”

“Great,” Arken said. “Love being a walking litmus test.”

Alina elbowed him lightly. “We’ll be with you,” she said.

“Debatable comfort level,” he muttered, but his mouth curled at the edges.

Sinthia was unusually quiet, eyes fixed on the black stain.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her under his breath.

She licked her lips, tail twitching.

“That canyon,” she said. “The roses... we used those for everything. Potions, perfumes, treatments. My mother used to joke that Rias would fall if the roses ever did. I laughed at her.”

Her throat worked.

“Not funny anymore,” she said.

He bumped her shoulder gently. “Then we make them stop dying,” he said. “Or we make something better. We already broke the economy in theory; might as well fix a farm.”

She snorted weakly. “Only you could talk about patching a world like it’s a bad game update.”

Seraith clapped once, drawing all eyes back to her.

“Gear up,” she ordered. “You leave within the hour. My guards will escort you to the canyon mouth and then try very hard not to get in your way.”

Jean raised a hand. “Clarifying question,” he said. “If this goes wrong and something unspeakable crawls out, what’s our fallback?”

Seraith’s smile turned humorless.

“If it can be reasoned with, you reason,” she said. “If it can be bound, you bind. If it wants to erase the continent, you stall it while I evacuate what I can and call in every favor from every entity that owes me blood.”

“Comforting theme today,” Arken muttered.

He looked at the map one last time.

Roses dying. Land cracking. Something old and hungry in the dark.

He thought of the first time he’d seen this world from above — three continents floating in a private sky, one of them already holding a scar he hadn’t known about.

He thought of his own aura waking Seris. Of the infant light eight hundred years ago. Of the way every tremor seemed to ripple outward from where he walked.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Let’s go talk to your abyss.”

Alina squeezed his hand under the table.

Sinthia’s grin came back, crooked and wild. “Field trip with my favorite catastrophe,” she said. “I’ll bring snacks.”

Seris’ voice hummed with the distant roar of waves. “And I,” she said, “will bring the deep.”

Jean sighed, already mentally writing three papers and a will.

The queen of demons watched them all, eyes bright, like someone watching the moment a match is struck above a powder keg.

“Try not to die,” Seraith said mildly.

“No promises,” Arken replied. “But we’ll do our best to make it interesting.”

They left the war room together — a farmer's daughter, a scholar, a sea monster, a demon spy, and a human who hadn't died like a hero and kept accidentally being treated like one anyway.

Outside, under the red sky of Rias, the air tasted faintly of roses and something burning far below.

Ohhh we're going straight to the canyon arc, huh? 😊

Okay, let's turn what you wrote into a clean, canon chapter beat.

Chapter 35 — Finger on the Map, Hand in the Abyss

They met the escort at the outer gate of Rias — ten elites in layered dark armor, horns polished, weapons humming faint with enchantments. Their captain wore a half-cloak pinned with the queen's sigil, expression carved from stone and long nights.

“Captain Varest,” Seraith had said when she introduced him. “He returns alive from things that should eat him. Try not to break that streak.”

Now, outside the gate, he studied Arken the way a veteran studies an untested weapon: warily, with unwilling respect.

“Our route will take half a day on foot,” Varest said, tapping the map board a junior held up. “We follow the ridge, avoid the ruined hamlets, and camp before nightfall near the outer farms. From there—”

“Can I see that?” Arken cut in.

The captain's eyes narrowed, but he tilted the board down.

Arken didn't read the ink.

He lifted his hand and let a thin, disciplined stream of mana bleed off his fingertips. Light traced the paper, then rose in a faint green projection — a top-down view of the region, lines of road and contour glowing in midair, little pulses where heavy mana pooled.

The demons all flinched at once.

Jean muttered, “Show-off,” but he was smiling.

“We came in from… here,” Arken said, circling a section of the projection with a fingertip. “Near the midline of your border. Are we passing that way again?”

Varest stared at the hovering map like it had insulted his training.

“No,” he said eventually. “But we will be within a league of it. Why?”

“Perfect,” Arken said, eyes brightening.

He clapped his hands together. The projection shattered into sparks and drifted down like lazy fireflies.

“Everyone put at least one finger on me,” he said.

There was a beat of silence.

“…I beg your pardon?” Varest said.

“Teleport chaining,” Jean translated dryly. “He’s trying to be helpful, not indecent. For once.”

Alina didn’t need more convincing. She stepped in close, looping her arm through Arken’s and pressing her side into his with an innocent little grin that fooled nobody.

“One finger?” she echoed sweetly. “Sorry. I got carried away.”

Seris manifested from the canteen at his belt in a veil of mist and water, her physical form coalescing just long enough to take his other hand. “If we’re cheating distance,” she said, “I refuse to be left behind.”

Feeling suddenly and irrationally left out, Sinthia slipped in behind him and, very deliberately, pressed her lower back against his hips.

“Is this enough contact, Master?” she murmured in his ear, voice wicked. “I can give you more surface area if the spell needs it.”

Heat shot up his spine. His breath stuttered; muscles went tight.

“Don’t—” he choked.

“Oh?” Her smirk curved against his cheek. “Something reacted.”

“Please die,” he whispered.

Jean sighed and laid a sensible hand on Arken's shoulder. The rest of the escort, thoroughly confused and a little pink, obeyed the practical version of the instruction and each grabbed onto a chain — gauntleted fingers to Jean's other arm, shoulders, forearms, building a living circuit.

"Is this... safe?" Varest demanded.

"Absolutely," Arken said. "Probably. Maybe. Don't let go."

Before anyone could argue, the world snapped.

There was no build-up, no chant, no circle.

One heartbeat they were standing at the gate.

The next, the entire group was weightless inside a column of green light — then slammed gently back into reality on a rocky rise overlooking dark forest.

The air was cooler here. The sky a slightly different shade of red. Zeno's distant tree-line hovered on the horizon like a sleeping giant.

A few of the demons dropped to one knee, gagging.

"What—" Varest rasped, clutching his stomach. "What did you do?"

"Shortcut," Arken said, cheeks a little pale himself. "Used your closest mana-anchor as a midpoint. We're halfway there now."

Jean pressed fingers to his temple. "And you didn't think to warn us before folding space like laundry?"

"I did say 'watch this,'" Arken protested.

"That's not a warning," Jean said. "That's a threat."

Alina laughed, breathless, hair mussed from the jump. "We're really this close already?" she asked, peering toward the horizon.

"Too close to walk the rest," Arken said. "It'll still take hours on foot."

Varest opened his mouth, closed it, then set his jaw. "I will not have you shattering my men's legs with more tricks," he said. "We march from here."

Arken considered him for half a second.

Then: “Or,” he offered, “we upgrade the travel.”

He stepped forward, aura thickening just a notch.

Air gathered under his feet like invisible stone.

He rose.

For a second, Varest’s hand flew to his sword.

Arken reached back, as if picking up imaginary luggage, and everyone he gestured at simply... lifted. The elite guard, Jean, Alina, Sinthia, even Seris in her semi-liquid form — all of them pulled into an invisible, gentle grip of force.

They bobbed a little, adjusting to nonexistent ground.

“This is unnatural,” one demon muttered, clutching his own chest.

“Relax,” Arken said. “It’s just a localized vector adjustment.”

“Speak human,” Alina called, clutching onto his arm again, eyes bright with awe and a little thrill.

“I’m carrying you,” he translated. “With air instead of arms.”

He turned to Varest. “Point us,” he said.

The captain stared for a long beat.

Then, slowly, he lifted his gauntleted hand and gestured toward a dark smear of land in the distance, where the horizon dipped suddenly and the red light seemed to sink.

Arken nodded.

They went.

From the ground it would have been half a day’s march through uneven terrain, broken paths, and ravines.

From the air, wrapped in Arken’s controlled field, it took them barely thirty minutes.

They moved fast enough to feel the wind, slow enough for the escort to keep their stomachs, low enough that Sinthia could point out landmarks in the Demon tongue — old watchtowers, ruined fields, villages clinging like barnacles to hills.

Below, the land dimmed.

The closer they got, the more the red-gold light of Rias bled into something darker — as if color itself were being leeched out of the soil.

They descended on a rise overlooking the canyon.

No one had to say they'd arrived.

They felt it.

Arken's feet touched earth and his stomach clenched, not from nausea this time but from resonance — that low, bone-deep hum he'd first felt over Saltwake, back when Seris had been a rumor under the waves and his Pulse was still learning it had a body.

Here, the hum was wrong.

The canyon tore the landscape open like a wound — a jagged gash in the earth, bottom hidden in shadow far deeper than it should've been. Along its edges, fields of roses stretched in withered rows. Some still held their shape — black-velvet petals rimmed in red, edges smoking faintly as mana burned out of them one vein at a time.

Others were already ash.

The air tasted metallic. Sweet. Sour.

Like ozone and old blood.

Alina shivered. "This feels... bad," she whispered. "In the farm, mana felt like a warm blanket. Here it feels like it's mad at us."

Seris stepped to the edge, eyes going distant as she listened down.

"When your kind tamper with currents you don't understand," she said softly, "the deep is patient. Until it isn't."

Jean squinted toward the canyon floor, knuckles white around the notebook he'd pulled out without realizing.

"It's not just ambient," he said. "There's a pattern to the way it's burning the roses — every few rows, there's a clean strip. Like something's... tasting and skipping."

"It's reacting to you," Sinthia murmured.

Arken had already felt it.

The moment he stepped within sight of the canyon, something below turned its head. That was what it felt like — not a push, not a pull, but attention. Heavy. Measuring. Familiar in a way that made his pulse stumble.

His aura, which he'd kept tidy and tight since Rias, started to prickle along his skin.

He didn't let it spread.

But the thing below was still... answering. Like a tuning fork picking up a note.

He swallowed.

"Seris," he said quietly. "Is that another one of us?"

The spirit didn't answer right away.

She stood at the lip of the canyon, bare feet inches from crumbling stone, head tilted as if listening to some distant song.

When she finally spoke, her voice was lower than usual.

"...I don't know," she said. "It feels like the Pulse. Old. Raw. But twisted. Like someone took our color and folded it underwater until it forgot which way was up."

Her eyes flicked to him, uneasy for the first time since she'd claimed him as Master.

"It could be a shard of what you were," she said. "Or something that woke up because you did. Or something that saw you fall once and decided it never wanted to fall that way."

"That's not ominous at all," Jean muttered.

Behind them, Captain Varest and his elites stood in a loose formation, weapons sheathed but hands tense. They hadn't said much since landing. Their faces said enough.

"You feel it too?" Arken asked.

Varest nodded once, sharply. "Every mana-user in a league radius feels it," he said. "If we stay much longer, the weaker ones will start hearing it whisper."

"Hearing what whisper?" Alina demanded.

The captain's jaw tightened. "That none of this is ours," he said. "That everything up here belongs to something down there and we are... trespassing."

Sinthia's tail bristled.

"This is our continent," she snapped. "Our cities. Our people. Whatever's below can file a complaint through proper channels."

Arken almost smiled, despite the way his bones were humming.

Figures.

Of course the first time he came to negotiate with the abyss, it would feel personal.

He took a slow breath, letting his shields adjust, calibrating the way his aura met the canyon's pressure. Not pushing. Not yielding. Drawing a line.

"Okay," he said softly, mostly to himself. "Let's see if you want to talk... or if you just want to burn flowers and sulk."

The abyss did not answer.

But the hum under his feet changed, just a little — like something ancient shifting in its sleep, suddenly aware that the green light it remembered was standing at the edge again.

And this time, it had brought friends.

The ground didn't just shake.

It *lurched*.

The first tremor hit like the world had been yanked sideways. The canyon walls shrieked, stone grinding on stone. Withering roses tore free of their roots in sheets, petals and ash thrown into the air like someone had slapped the whole field.

Arken didn't think.

His hand snapped up, mana obeying the way it always did—total, instant.

Shields layered out from him in a snap: one to catch falling stone, one to cradle bodies, one to harden the air itself so no one tumbled into the canyon. Healing fields bloomed over the escort like soft green rain, catching twisted ankles before they twisted, slowing heart rates before panic tipped into shock.

Then the *second* wave hit.

This one wasn't stone.

It was *presence*.

The air went heavy and wrong. Stomachs dropped. Every demon guard doubled over as if punched in the gut; two went to their knees, gagging. Alina clutched her head, teeth bared in silent pain. Sinthia swore and tried to stand straight, sweat breaking across her brow. Even Varest, solid as an old fortress, hit one hand to the ground to steady himself.

Jean lifted his eyes—just once, just long enough to look past Arken toward the ripple at the edge of the canyon—

—and saw him.

A silhouette at the far lip of the chasm. Humanoid. Lean. Aura so dense it bent the light around him. Skin dark as wet obsidian, hair a white so bright it looked carved from moonlight. Ears tapered, eyes like twin shards of void.

An elf.

But wrong.

A *Dark* elf, aura flaring in a color Jean's brain refused to name, equal and opposite to Arken's green.

For a heartbeat, their gazes met across the distance.

Jean's vision tunneled. His scholar's mind tried to catalog what he was seeing—pulse signature, resonance, pattern—and just... failed.

His legs gave out.

He hit the dirt, out cold.

“Jean—!” Alina choked, reaching, but her hand hit Arken's shield instead.

The new arrival didn't introduce himself.

He disappeared.

No spell. No chant. No circle. Just—gone. The vertigo of something moving faster than senses could track.

Arken barely had time to register the absence before the Dark Elf reappeared *inside his guard.*

A fist like a steel meteor slammed into Arken's face.

The world became impact.

Stone ruptured under his heels, the canyon rim caving in. The shockwave cratered outward, sending a ring of fractured rock flying in all directions. The sound hit a moment later—thunder with teeth.

The escort went weightless inside Arken's shield-bubble, tossed like dice.

Arken's head snapped sideways. For the first time since waking in this world, his vision went white with raw, stupid pain.

He can hit me?

The thought flashed, shocked, almost delighted.

Then the bigger thought shoved in behind it:

They're still here.

He didn't bother to retaliate.

He grabbed.

Not with hands—with *ownership*. Every mana-shell he'd put around them, every protective layer, he seized as handles and *ripped* them out of the canyon.

“Go,” he snarled.

Space folded.

Alina saw his face for half a heartbeat as the world inverted around her—eyes wide, not with fear for himself, but with naked panic for them.

Then the canyon was gone.

They slammed back into existence in polished stone and velvet and gold—Queen Seraith's private chamber. The Demon Queen's wineglass shattered on the floor as ten armored elites, one human farmer, one exasperated demon spy, one unconscious scholar and one semi-liquid sea-spirit hit the floor in a pile of green-tinged light.

Alina landed on her knees and *screamed*.

It wasn't pretty. It wasn't poetic. It was rage and terror and the sound of someone ripped out of a moment they weren't finished living.

Seraith lurched to her feet, eyes going wide as she counted heads.

"Korl's blood—where is he?" she snapped.

No Arken.

No pulse in the room but the distant echo of him.

Far away in Yoatha, King Renard dropped his quill, crown slipping sideways as he grabbed the table. Queen Elainia's wine turned to trembling ripples. In Zeno, Queen Lysoria staggered on her living balcony as the trees around her shuddered, leaves whispering the name they'd all learned to associate with that impossible green weight.

The Pulse had fallen silent near them—

—and flared somewhere else.

Back at the canyon.

Arken hit the bottom of his own crater hard enough to make dust *jump*.

Stone spiderwebbed under him. His ears rang. His nose was bleeding.

He laughed once, incredulous.

Then he wiped his face and vanished.

The Dark Elf's second punch met empty air. It tore a gouge in the sky instead, compressing clouds into a spiraling hole.

Arken reappeared above him, heel already coming down.

The kick landed on the Dark Elf's raised forearm. The impact cracked the air like glass. The canyon trembled, its walls sloughing stone like old scabs.

Dark eyes met green.

Up close, the stranger's face was... calm. No hatred. No gloating. Just focused, steady intent. That almost made it worse.

"Talk," Arken grated.

The elf twisted, using the force of Arken's own kick against him. In a blink, they swapped positions—the Dark Elf above, Arken below, momentum inverted.

A blade of condensed night formed along the elf's shin.

The axe-kick came down like a guillotine.

Arken caught it on crossed forearms. His bones screamed. The ground didn't stand a chance—another hole, deeper this time.

Shockwaves raced out along the canyon, turning fields of withering roses into waves of black dust.

From a distance, it didn't look like a fight between two people. It looked like the weather was having a nervous breakdown.

"Fine," Arken hissed. "No talking it is."

He stopped holding back.

The limiters he'd built into himself—those quiet, neat little scripts of *don't break the toys, don't crush the city, don't scare the children*—snapped one by one.

His aura dropped.

Not out. *Down*.

The green Pulse that usually wrapped around him like a cloak became a vertical impact, slamming into the world.

For an instant, gravity lied.

Everybody with mana on the planet felt it.

Mages in towers woke screaming. Demon warlocks dropped their focus circles mid-ritual. Elven children clung to tree-trunks that suddenly felt too small to hold them. The King and Queen of Yoatha found themselves on their knees, crowns blown sideways by a wind that didn't exist.

At the canyon, the effect was... concentrated.

The Dark Elf's eyes narrowed. His own aura flared in answer, shadows thickening around him until they felt like a liquid pulling at the edges of reality.

He tried to step in.

The pressure slapped him back.

Like walking into a storm that didn't want him.

His lips peeled back, finally showing teeth.

Good, Arken thought distantly. *Hate it.*

He moved.

From the outside, it was just flashes—green, then black, then green again, streaks carving the sky. The two of them blurred into lines as they crossed the length of the canyon in seconds, trading blows that didn't always seem to connect with flesh but always connected with *something*.

One clash sent the Dark Elf skidding along the canyon wall, boots carving molten grooves in stone. Another sent Arken flying straight up, through a layer of clouds. For one weightless second, he saw the curve of the world again, all three continents like bruises on the surface of something alive.

He fell back smiling, punch already drawn.

They met in the middle.

The collision made the air *invert*. Sound vanished for a heartbeat, replaced by a bass thump that lived in bone and teeth. Roses within a mile radius turned to glass for a second, then shattered into glitter.

The Dark Elf's head snapped back. A crack ran down the black armor over his chest, light leaking through like something inside was brighter than the outside.

He landed light as a feather on a floating shard of stone.

Blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

He wiped it away with his thumb, looked at it, then flicked it aside.

Finally—*finally*—he spoke.

“You were... quieter last time,” he said.

Last time.

Arken’s skin crawled.

“What are you?” he demanded.

The Dark Elf tilted his head.

“What you refused to be,” he said simply. “What you left behind when you fell.”

His aura twisted.

The shadow around him condensed, armor sloughing away in plates that dissolved into smoke. Beneath, his body was a lattice of scars and glowing lines — like someone had carved runes into his bones and let the mana leak through. His hair floated in a nonexistent wind. When he opened his eyes fully, they weren’t void anymore.

They were green.

The same shade as Arken’s.

But inverted at the edges, rimmed in shadow.

Arken’s pulse stuttered.

The elf blurred.

A knee drove into Arken’s ribs. He felt something *give*. The next three hits he only half-saw—an elbow to the jaw, a hammer-fist to the spine, a palm strike that rewrote his balance. Arken tumbled end over end, slamming through three floating rocks and half a canyon wall.

He caught himself on instinct, flight magic kicking in before the ground did it for him.

His chest burned. His vision doubled.

He grinned.

“You hit like a bugged raid boss,” he spat, spitting blood. “I kind of love it.”

The Dark Elf regarded him with that same steady, terrifying calm.

“Stop playing,” he said. “Or you will break again.”

Something in Arken’s temper *snapped*.

“*You punched my friends,*” he snarled. “*You show up, quake the world, nearly knock them into a canyon, hit me without saying a word, and I’m the one who needs to stop playing?*”

The air around him went neon.

He raised a hand.

He didn’t say a spell.

He just *wrote* the feeling of “stop existing there” and pointed it at a chunk of canyon wall a hundred meters away.

The stone didn’t explode.

It just... vanished. Neatly. Like someone had erased a paragraph.

The Dark Elf’s eyes tightened the tiniest bit.

“There it is,” he murmured. “The part of you the world couldn’t handle.”

Arken’s hands were shaking.

Not from strain.

From how *good* it felt to stop tugging the leash.

“Talk fast,” he said. “Because the only reason this canyon is still here is that I keep remembering I like people.”

The Dark Elf’s aura flared, equal to his.

Two storms, pressed edge-to-edge.

“You were meant to erase them,” he said quietly. “Not cradle them. You were meant to clean the board, not play house on it.”

“Yeah?” Arken shot back. “Well, I’m bugged. Send a ticket.”

He moved.

No holding back this time. No politeness. No “don’t scare them.”

They clashed again, faster, harder. Each impact carved new scars into the canyon, but Arken kept lacing reality with invisible braces—threads of “hold, don’t break,” so the world flexed instead of shattering.

The Dark Elf adapted.

He stopped trading punches and started *slipping*. Every time Arken thought he had him, the elf was already somewhere else, turning Arken’s own momentum against him, making him work harder, burn more focus.

Arken’s vessel protested.

Muscles tore. Bones hairline-cracked. His heart thudded loud and uneven in his ears—too much mana moving through not enough meat.

He felt Seris in the back of his mind, distant and furious and *sick*, fighting the echo of his overload from wherever she was. Felt Alina’s panic like a phantom touch. Felt Sinthia’s fear under her usual filth.

He’d teleported them away. He’d done the right thing.

So why did it suddenly feel like fighting alone again in a dark room with nowhere to fall but *down*?

The Dark Elf saw it—the flicker of doubt, the flash of remembered exhaustion.

He stepped in.

His fist stopped a hair from Arken’s chest.

Not hitting.

Offered.

“Come back,” he said.

Power coiled in that held strike. Enough to cave in mountains. Enough to shatter this body and let the Pulse pour back out free.

Arken looked at it.

At the hand. At the scars. At the offer.

He thought about a rooftop and a green-haired woman handing him clothes. About a sea-spirit calling him “Master” with exasperated fondness. About a demon spy calling him “toy” while secretly checking his back in every crowd. About a scholar whose first instinct, faced with god-tier nonsense, was still to take notes.

He thought about tostones and cracked appraisal orbs and sleeping under trees in Zeno.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “No.”

He didn’t dodge the fist.

He grabbed it.

His other hand slammed into the Dark Elf’s chest, fingers splayed.

“New rule,” Arken growled, eyes burning. “You don’t get to decide what I’m for.”

He pushed.

Not power at the elf. Power at the *connection* between them.

For a heartbeat, their auras overlapped perfectly—two halves of the same impossible curve. The canyon dropped away. Sight dropped away. Everything was green-white-black pressure and shared memory they didn’t have.

A battlefield eight hundred years ago.

A world begging for mercy.

A light that refused to kill what it could save.

Then the connection snapped.

The Dark Elf was *gone*.

No explosion. No scream. Just absence, like a file deleted too fast to see the confirmation window.

Arken hung there alone over the canyon, panting, body screaming, aura still crushing down hard enough to make the roses smoke.

Slowly, deliberately, he reeled it back in.

He layered his shields back over the scarred ground, over the canyon edges, over the dying flowers.

Then he looked up at the sky.

“...I really,” he said hoarsely to no one, “hate surprise boss fights.”

Far away, three queens and two monarchs looked toward the same point on the horizon at the same time, hearts beating a little too hard.

The Pulse was still there.

Bruised.

Defiant.

And no longer alone.

Chapter ?? — The Pulse That Came Back Quiet

The Demon Queen’s private chamber was a mess of green afterglow and scrambled bodies. The last of Arken’s teleport shimmer faded off the floor, leaving ten elite guards groaning in a heap, Alina on her knees clutching at a shield that was no longer there, Jean sprawled half-conscious, Sinthia white-faced and shaking, and Seris half-liquid in a bowl of wine she’d ended up in by accident.

Then the world lurched.

The *second* pulse had hit.

They all felt it—like the sky dropped fifty meters and then snapped back into place. The pressure punched through walls, floors, and wards, then vanished as suddenly as it came, like someone had slammed a door on a hurricane.

And then... nothing.

No aftershock.

No tremors.

No sense of that impossible green filling the horizon.

Just silence.

Alina's head was still ringing from the teleport when she felt it.

Nothing.

Arken had been a constant presence for weeks now—like standing next to a fireplace so big you sometimes forgot it wasn't just the room. Even when he hid his aura, she still *felt* him if she paid attention. The comfort of healing warmth, the subtle hum in her bones.

It was gone.

She staggered to her feet, ignoring the guards, ignoring the Queen, ignoring the echo of her own scream still hanging in the air.

“Where is he?” she snapped.

Queen Seraith was already standing, eyes narrowed, claws digging little crescent moons into the stone railing by her dais. Her own aura had flared halfway up the tower on instinct when the second pulse hit, then had nowhere to go.

“I... don’t feel him anymore,” one of the demon knights said hoarsely, clutching his head. “My Queen, the pressure is gone. The Pulse—”

“Is not dead,” Seris rasped.

Everyone turned.

Seris wasn’t doing well. The bowl of wine she’d half-merged into clattered to the floor as she pulled herself into a more coherent shape, water dragging itself together around a glowing core and then firming up into her humanoid form.

Her skin was paler than usual. Sea-green eyes rimmed in dark circles. She looked hungover in a way only an ancient ocean spirit could.

Alina moved before she thought about it, steadying her by the shoulders.

“Seris—”

“I know when he’s *gone*,” Seris snapped, voice cracking. “That wasn’t gone. That was him... *closing*. Pulling in. Like when you hold your breath too long and pretend you’re fine.”

She shut her eyes, breathing slowly, as if listening down a long, long tunnel.

“There’s still a thread,” she whispered. “Thin. Faint. But there.”

Jean had dragged himself up to sit against a pillar, head pounding, eyes unfocused behind his lenses.

“So he’s alive,” he croaked. “Just being an overachieving idiot somewhere else.”

Sinthia had both hands pressed over her mouth, trying very hard to look composed and failing. Her tail—normally lazy, smug—stood stiff and trembling.

“If that Dark thing killed him, I swear I’ll—” She caught herself, voice cracking, and dropped her hands to glare at the floor instead. “Whatever. He’s not allowed to die before I get what I want. That’s the rule.”

Alina shot her a look that promised they’d be having a *conversation* later, but right now she didn’t care how Sinthia phrased it.

Alive.

He was alive.

That was enough to keep her from falling apart on the spot.

Queen Seraith took a slow breath and made a decision.

“Captain,” she snapped.

Varest, who had somehow managed to land in a kneel as if the chaotic teleport had been rehearsed, straightened instantly.

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Rally your ten. Full armor, no banners, no pomp. We’re going back.”

One of the younger knights blanched. “Back? Your Majesty, the pressure—if we go near that canyon again—”

“The pressure that was killing you,” Seraith cut in, “is gone. Or at least quiet enough that you are still breathing long enough to argue with me. He moved you first. He risked staying there alone so you wouldn’t get caught between him and that... thing.”

Her eyes flashed.

“I will not leave *that* kind of loyalty lying in a crater.”

Alina’s throat tightened. She hadn’t thought about it like that. She’d just... felt herself ripped away and then empty.

Seris swayed.

“You won’t make it in time if you march,” she said. “I can’t pull you all through water, not like this. But...”

Her gaze slid to the Queen.

“The palace has a gate, doesn’t it?” she asked tiredly. “A real one. Old. Expensive. The kind you don’t use because the mana tax is obscene.”

Seraith’s lips thinned.

“Of course it does.”

Jean blinked. “You have a palace mass-teleport? And you didn’t open with that?”

The Queen flicked him a look.

“I didn’t use it while *he* was still fighting,” she said. “I like my palace in one piece.”

Fair.

The palace gate room was buried deep—under three layers of warded stair, behind doors that hummed with enough defensive sigils to make even Jean shut up and just read.

The gate itself was an immense stone arch filled with still air that looked thicker than it should be. Runes crawled across its surface like slow lightning. In the center, a dark crystal hung suspended, faintly pulsing.

“Form up,” Varest ordered, his voice taking on that clipped command tone that made people move without thinking.

The Knights obeyed, forming a half-ring around the gate. Seraith stepped to the front, one hand on the frame.

Alina, Seris, Jean, and Sinthia clustered close behind.

“Can we track him through this?” Alina asked.

“We can track the *scar* he left getting you back,” the Queen said. “Gate magic hates being shown up. The path is still warm.”

She laid her palm flat against the stone.

“Target: last fluctuation,” she murmured, words old and sharp. “Anchor: royal seal. Override my own restrictions.”

The crystal flared. Lines of light raced along the arch, carving the air into a turning circle.

Alina’s stomach dropped as the world twisted.

There wasn’t the gentle cushioned feeling of Arken’s teleports here. No understanding behind it. Just raw spatial brutality. The gate grabbed their coordinates and yanked.

For a moment, there was upside-down.

Then there was dust.

They emerged at the edge of the canyon.

Or rather, what was left of the canyon.

The ground under their boots was cracked and scored like something gigantic had clawed its way through, then changed its mind. Huge chunks of stone hung in the air at wrong angles, held in place by faint green script-lines Arken had evidently slapped onto reality on his way out.

The withering roses were gone.

In their place, a strange quiet had settled—blackened soil, scattered petals turned to ash... and here and there, tiny green shoots poking through, as if the land was trying again already.

Alina's breath caught.

“Arken...” she whispered.

He'd tried to fix it even while he was breaking himself to stop that thing.

“Spread out,” Varest ordered. “Look for any sign of—”

Seris didn't wait.

She stepped forward, barefoot on still-warm stone, eyes half-lidded, palms falling open at her sides. The green light at her core brightened.

She turned slowly, like a compass needle deciding.

There.

Without warning, she just *ran*.

“Seris!” Alina shouted, then went after her.

The others followed—Jean still a little wobbly, Sinthia surprisingly silent, Varest and his knights moving in disciplined formation that immediately fell apart because nothing about this situation was “disciplined.”

They followed Seris along the canyon lip, over fractured stone stabilized by Arken's reinforcement scripts, past a gouge that looked like someone had deleted part of the wall, and around a bend where the cliff splintered into staggered ledges.

He was there.

Half-buried in a shallow crater of his own making, lying on his back, one arm flung out, fingers still curled like he'd been holding onto something that wasn't there anymore.

His clothes were shredded at one shoulder. His jaw was bruised. There was dried blood under his nose and along his cheek. For once, he looked... small.

The aura around him was so faint Alina wouldn't have noticed it if she weren't already attuned to him. A quiet, steady glow instead of a sun.

For a heartbeat, she thought he wasn't breathing.

Then his chest rose—slow, careful, like it hurt.

She didn't remember deciding to move.

Suddenly she was on her knees in the dust, hands on his face, fingers checking for warmth, pulse, *anything*.

"Arken," she whispered. "Hey. Hey. Open your eyes. That's an order."

His skin was hot. Not fever-hot. Mana-hot.

Behind her, she heard Jean exhale like someone had punched the air out of him in relief.

"Still alive," he said softly. "Stupid, impossible... still alive."

Seraith stood a little distance away, mouth tight, eyes narrowed. She was too much Queen to sprint forward, but her tail gave her away—lashing slowly, betraying tension.

Sinthia... just stared.

Her usual smirk was gone. Her eyes were glossy.

"If you die here," she muttered under her breath, "in some ugly hole, I'm rewriting your epitaph personally."

Seris dropped to a knee on his other side. When her hand touched his shoulder, a faint green ripple traveled between them.

"He overreached," she said quietly. "But he pulled back in time. Vessel strain. Mana backlash. Nerves screaming. Heart exhausted, not broken."

She stroked his hair back from his forehead, something oddly gentle in the gesture for a creature who'd once nearly flooded Saltwake out of spite.

"He chose to hold form," she added. "Instead of dissolving. That... matters."

Alina's throat tightened.

"Of course he did," she said. "He likes being human now."

Arken made a small sound.

It wasn't a word. More like a confused protest from someone being dragged back out of a deep, necessary sleep.

His eyes fluttered.

For a moment, they were unfocused—seeing the fight still, or the sky, or some ocean only he and Seris knew.

Then they found Alina's face.

"Oh," he croaked. "Good. I didn't... dream you."

Alina laughed. It came out half-sob.

"You absolute idiot," she said, voice shaking. "You teleported us away and went one-on-one with That Thing and then didn't bother to come back right away—"

"Couldn't," he mumbled. "Needed... breath. And... you were safer if I..."

He tried to sit up.

His body made a formal complaint. Everything hurt. On a scale of one to "you erased a canyon," he was somewhere between "hit by several trucks" and "respawn timer pending."

Alina pushed him gently back down.

"Don't." Her eyes were bright, angry, and very, very soft. "You did enough for one day."

Jean shuffled closer, dropping into a sit with a groan.

"So," he said, aiming for dry and almost getting there, "just to confirm for my notes: entity was a Dark Elf analogue with Pulse-adjacent aura, equal and opposite resonance, physically capable of punching you in the face, and emotionally unavailable."

Arken huffed something that might've been a laugh.

"Yeah," he rasped. "Punch... hurt. Kind of exciting, not gonna lie."

Sinthia snorted, some of the tension draining out of her shoulders.

"Of course that's your takeaway," she muttered. "Gets flattened into a crater and decides it's 'exciting.'"

Varest cleared his throat.

“My Lord Pulse,” he said, bowing despite the dust and chaos around them. “On behalf of Her Majesty, I apologize for the… abrupt circumstances of your first visit.”

Arken turned his head slightly and squinted up at him.

“Pretty sure the Dark Elf punching me wasn’t your fault,” he murmured. “But apology accepted anyway, Captain.”

He looked past Varest to Seraith.

“Sorry about the… continental heartbeat,” he added weakly. “I tried not to… shatter your stuff.”

The Demon Queen actually laughed.

It was short and incredulous, but real.

“You obliterated a monster nobody else knew how to see,” she said. “You teleported my best fighters out of the blast radius instead of using them as shields. And you apologized for the *aesthetic* damage.” Her eyes gleamed. “If my ‘stuff’ breaks under that, it wasn’t worth keeping.”

She stepped closer, heels steady on cracked stone.

“For the record,” she added, “if you had not come back, I would have spent the rest of my reign being very, very annoyed with you.”

Sinthia’s head snapped toward her.

“Very annoyed?” she echoed. “That’s what we’re calling it?”

Seraith ignored her.

Arken sighed, exhausted and weirdly light.

“So,” he said. “Did… everyone else make it back okay? Any missing limbs? Traumatic teleport nausea? Emotional damage?”

“Just yours,” Jean said dryly. “We’ll invoice you.”

Alina leaned down, pressing her forehead briefly against his.

“You scared us,” she whispered. “Don’t do it like that again.”

He closed his eyes for a second, letting the warmth of her touch anchor him.

“I’ll... try to schedule my near-death experiences in advance next time,” he muttered. “Maybe put them on the Guild board. ‘Looking for party: one Dark Elf problem, bring snacks.’”

Sinthia actually giggled. It was a tiny, broken sound, like something cracking under pressure and letting light through.

Seris shook her head, a small smile pulling at her mouth despite herself.

“You are insufferable,” she said. “It’s inconvenient how attached I’ve become.”

He cracked one eye open.

“Love you too, Sea Wi-Fi,” he said.

Varest made a strangled noise that might have been a laugh he was absolutely *not* going to admit to.

Seraith exhaled, tension finally bleeding out of her posture.

“Get him up,” she ordered gently. “Slowly. If he dies now, I refuse to be blamed for it.”

The knights moved carefully, two of them easing Arken into a sit, then to his feet, supporting most of his weight. His legs protested, but his shields were already knitting micro-damage back together. He felt like a bruised god wrapped around a very tired human.

He glanced once over his shoulder at the canyon.

The scars he’d carved into it glowed faintly with subsiding green, the stabilizing spells he’d thrown down holding the landscape in place. Somewhere, in a corner of his mind he hadn’t quite looked at yet, was the memory of the Dark Elf’s offer—and the feel of those inverted green eyes.

Last time.

Later.

Right now, there were people holding him up who would absolutely drop him if he tried to go round two.

He let himself lean on them.

As they started back toward the still-active gate shimmer, Alina kept pace right at his side, shoulder brushing his arm, silently refusing to let go.

Sinthia walked on his other flank, expression back to half-smirk, tail flicking—but every three steps, her eyes flicked to him, checking, checking, checking.

Jean was already muttering to himself, cataloging, theory-crafting, occasionally glancing back at the erased chunk of canyon with the guilty awe of a scholar who had just seen someone edit reality with their bare hands.

Seris brought up the rear, hand trailing along the canyon wall, anchoring every step. She hummed something under her breath—not quite a song, not quite a spell. A tide-prayer for idiots who throw themselves into storms.

The Pulse was back.

Quiet.

Bruised.

Still stubbornly wearing a human face.

And as they stepped through the gate's light and back into the Demon Queen's palace, one simple fact settled over all of them, in different words but the same shape:

Whatever that Dark Elf was...

He wasn't done with Arken.

And Arken sure as hell wasn't done with him.

Chapter ?? — The Sea That Refused to Let Go

Arken did not wake up.

The Demon Queen gave them a guest suite with more silk than sense, high windows, and enough wards to make Jean whistle under his breath. They laid him on the largest bed, wrapped his bruised ribs, cooled his forehead, checked his pulse.

The first day, everyone told themselves he just needed rest.

The third day, Alina stopped pretending she wasn't sleeping sitting upright in a chair pushed right up against the mattress, his hand in both of hers.

The seventh day, Sinthia stopped joking about "beauty sleep" and started snapping at anyone who suggested they leave his side.

By the fourteenth day, even the walls felt nervous.

He looked... wrong.

Not in big ways at first. Tiny things.

His scars from the canyon fight faded, then reappeared, then faded again. The faint calluses on his fingers from coding, from farm work, from spell-ink, smoothed out overnight and returned the next afternoon.

Sometimes his skin seemed too pale, like the color had been washed out and painted back in a shade off.

Then, one morning in the second week, Alina woke from a half-hour doze and almost screamed.

Arken's arm was missing.

Not gone in a bloody way. Not severed.

Just... not there.

From the shoulder down, his form blurred—skin, bone, muscle turning into green light threaded with static, the shape blinking in and out like some god had hit "undo" and then regretted it.

"JEAN!" she choked.

By the time Jean stumbled in, hair wild, Arken's arm was back.

Same skin. Same fingers. Same faint scar on his knuckles from where he'd punched a fruit stand weeks ago.

Jean stared, chest heaving.

"That's not healing," he whispered. "That's... rewrite."

It didn't stop there.

Over the next days, his body flickered in pieces. A leg. Half his chest. Once, his entire face went transparent, his features dissolving into a lattice of pulsing green geometry before knitting back together, eyelashes and all.

Every time it happened, Alina grabbed his wrist, feeling his pulse like she could anchor him by pure stubbornness.

Every time, Seris went a little paler.

She felt it in a way none of them could.

To everyone else, it was horrifying—watching your friend be erased and redrawn.

To Seris, bound to his core, it was worse.

Because she knew exactly what was happening.

He was dying.

Not once.

Over and over and over again.

His vessel hit the limit, failed, dissolved into its pulse-state, and then stubbornly dragged itself back together because it refused to stop being *him*.

Every time he came back, a little more of his mortal durability went with it.

A battery overcharged, discharging in loops, still somehow not exploding.

One night, when the others had finally passed out from sheer emotional exhaustion, Seris sat alone at the foot of the bed, knees drawn up, chin on her arms.

He flickered again.

For one moment, his heart stopped.

For just one moment, so did hers.

“Enough,” she whispered. “You’re going to shatter yourself, little Master.”

The room was silent.

His chest resumed its slow, stubborn rise and fall.

She closed her eyes.

When she spoke again, her voice was not for him. It was for the sea that had shaped her.

“I know,” she said softly. “I know. This is the cost. But I’m not watching him drown in his own light.”

She moved fast after that.

The next morning, when Alina went to fetch water and Jean went to bully the palace apothecaries for more diagnostic runes, they came back to an empty bed.

No Arken.

No Seris.

Just a damp ring on the stone where water had pooled briefly before following her.

Saltwake was grey when they arrived.

Seris didn’t knock.

She rose from the bay in a surge of water that startled six dockhands into nearly falling in. Her current took Arken gently with her, his unconscious body held above the waves by a cradle of glowing sea.

She climbed the seawall in a single sheet, water dragging itself up stone and pulling him along, then stepped onto the wet planks of the docks with bare feet that left no prints.

The city murmured around her—gulls, ropes, whispers—but Saltwake knew better than to block an old thing in a bad mood.

Jean’s mother was waiting for her.

Of course she was.

Maritha had always had that unnerving timing—the way people who listened to currents and rumor and ward-ink did. She stood near the old pilings, shawl thrown around her shoulders, sea-worn hands clutching a staff that hummed faintly with modest, well-practiced magic.

When she saw Arken, her jaw tightened.

“When my boy’s letters said ‘trouble,’ ” she muttered, “I thought he meant bureaucrats. Not god-children trying to tear themselves apart.”

Seris didn’t waste time with pleasantries.

“I need an anchor,” she said, voice flat from too many sleepless nights. “A mortal one. Old. Steady. Someone who understands warding the way roots understand dirt.”

Maritha’s eyes wrinkled.

“You brought him to the right rotten old woman, then.”

They carried Arken—Seris with water, Maritha with hands—into a narrow shrine built into the seawall itself. It wasn’t impressive. Just a stone room with cracked tiles, a shallow pool, and a faded mural of some forgotten sea-god that had long since flaked away.

Seris stepped into the pool, water lapping at her calves, and laid Arken gently to float in front of her.

He looked small again.

Lines of script glimmered faintly under his skin now, tracing ribs, collarbones, spine. His pulse had become its own rune.

“He won’t survive this cycle,” Seris said quietly. “You know that.”

Maritha didn’t flinch.

“I know what a failing ward looks like.”

She knelt at the edge of the pool, dipping gnarled fingers into the water.

“What are you offering?” she asked. “And don’t you dare say ‘everything’ without thinking it through.”

Seris swallowed.

Then squared her shoulders.

“My core,” she said. “Half my remaining tide. Enough of my... self to wrap his Pulse in something older than it. To teach it how to... ebb.”

The word tasted strange in her mouth.

She had been surge and crash and flood for centuries.

Not ebb.

Maritha stared at her a long time.

“You know what that means for you,” she said. “Tidebound no more. No more long horizons. No more storms.”

Seris gave a humorless little smile.

“You say that like I haven’t already chained myself to that idiot since the day he fell into my bay.”

She looked down at him, expression almost fond.

“He’s the first land-thing I’ve met who makes the world feel as loud as the deep,” she murmured. “If he dies because he didn’t know how to be small... that’s on me.”

She stepped fully into the water until it came to her knees, then hips.

The pool responded, glowing green from within, as if something remembered it used to be worshipped here.

Maritha stood.

“All right, then,” she said. “I’ll hold the shape. You pour. We try not to let him explode.”

She planted her staff at the head of the pool and began tracing sigils in the air—careful, conservative, nothing flashy. Circles of containment, channels for flow, gentle gates instead of cages.

“I’m not strong enough to fight your tide,” she warned. “I’m just... giving it rails.”

“That’s all I need,” Seris said.

She closed her eyes.

If Arken had been conscious, he might've described the feeling as uninstalling and reinstalling his own existence with a better operating system.

As it was, he just... fell.

Fell through the memory of his rooftop. Fell past the library, the farm, the stolen moments of peace, the fight in the canyon, the Dark Elf's fist, the punching, everything.

He fell through *light*.

The Green Pulse that was him had become a storm without walls.

His human shape, normally a sturdy little container, was hairline-cracked all over.

Pressure leaking.

Spillover.

Reset.

Repeat.

It hurt, in an abstract, bone-deep way. Not like a wound.

Like *overuse*.

Like the worst burnout he'd ever had in his old life, multiplied until even his cells felt tired.

Then something else entered the storm.

Cool.

Deep.

Old.

It moved through his Pulse like the sea fingering the edge of a beach, testing where the sand held.

Shh, Seris whispered, but not with words. With tide.

His panic recognized her before his thoughts did.

The storm snapped at her, half-instinct.

She didn't flinch.

She let it tear pieces of her up—currents, memories, old battles with ships and leviathans—then wrapped those pieces around him instead.

Maritha's wards held the edges, giving all that motion somewhere to *go*.

In the shrine, the water rose without splashing. Runes burned along the stones, tracing circles of soft, throbbing light.

Maritha gritted her teeth, muttering under her breath, arms shaking.

“Easy... easy... don't you dare overfill my walls, you overgrown glowstick...”

Seris stepped closer to Arken's floating form until her chest touched his.

Her own body was starting to fray around the edges now.

“She really loves you, you know,” she murmured, her hand hovering just over his heart.
“The green-haired one. She hasn't slept properly in weeks.”

A flicker went through his Pulse. Recognition. Ache.

“And the demon,” she added. “Annoying. Loud. Clingy. Would burn the world to see what color your ashes turn.”

Another flicker.

“And my idiot scholar.” Her voice softened more. “Jean. The boy who tried to talk down a storm with logic and tea.”

The storm shuddered.

Seris took a breath she didn't need.

“You are not allowed,” she said, “to leave that kind of devotion lying around like litter.”

She pressed her palm flat against his chest.

“And besides,” she added, voice barely above the hum, “for all your flaws, you made me *laugh*. Do you have any idea how rare that is for something my age?”

She pushed.

Her core—the concentrated, ancient knot of magic that had once been the heart of a sea monster, then a guardian, then a woman in a dress of water—unraveled.

Half of it stayed.

Half of it went into him.

In Arken’s inner storm, something changed.

The endless churning found... rhythm.

Instead of surging in one direction until it tore its container, the Pulse learned to fold back on itself. To inhale as well as exhale.

Not less.

Not weaker.

Just... *wave* instead of constant blast.

The cracks in his metaphysical vessel sealed with sea-glow. Where his human limits had once chipped and strained, they were now reinforced with borrowed tide.

Still mortal.

Still soft.

But less alone.

In the shrine, Seris’ body went from solid to translucent.

Maritha’s breath hitched.

“Girl,” she gasped, “that’s enough—”

Seris shook her head once, hair streaming like submerged ink.

“Not... quite,” she whispered. “He’s greedy.”

She smiled faintly as the last of her outline blurred.

“Figures.”

Her eyes met Maritha’s.

“Tell him,” she said, “I volunteered.”

Then the light that was Seris folded the rest of the way into Arken.

The pool went still.

Maritha’s wards dimmed to a gentle, steady pulse.

Arken floated a moment longer.

Then, very slowly, his fingers twitched.

He woke up to the sound of waves.

Not metaphor waves. Actual ones. The scent of salt filled his lungs before he opened his eyes. His head ached in a dull, used-muscle way.

The ceiling above him was rough stone, cracked and familiar.

He blinked.

“...Saltwake?” he croaked.

His voice worked.

That seemed unfairly surprising.

He tried to sit up and realized he was half-submerged in a shallow pool, clothes clinging, hair plastered to his forehead.

Maritha sat nearby on a low stool, shawl wrapped tight around her shoulders, staff across her knees. She looked about twenty years older and ten times more smug.

“Well,” she said, voice rough. “Look who decided to stop terrifying old women.”

He swallowed.

“Did I... die?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Repeatedly. It was very rude.”

He managed a weak laugh, then winced as his chest complained.

Something else tugged at his attention.

Not from outside.

From inside.

Like a low tide knocking politely on the door of his consciousness.

He went still.

“...Seris?” he whispered.

The answer wasn’t words.

It was the feeling of cool water on overheated skin. The memory of her standing on the docks, chin high, pretending not to care as much as she did.

Then, faintly, a dry voice in the back of his mind:

If you ever do that again without warning me, I am repossessing my mana personally.

His breath hitched.

“Seris,” he said again, louder.

Maritha watched his face and exhaled slowly.

“She’s not... gone,” the older woman said. “But she’s not what she was. You’re carrying her, boy. Like a tide in your bones. Half of her, anyway.”

His eyes burned.

“That’s—”

“—insane? Yes,” Maritha said. “Romantic? Also yes. Inconvenient? Absolutely. Get used to having a backseat ocean.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Did she... was there another way?”

Maritha’s gaze softened.

“Not one that kept you both as you were,” she said gently. “She made a choice. Sea-things don’t do that lightly.”

He looked down at his hands.

They looked... the same.

Slight scars. Faint calluses.

But when he reached inward, his Pulse no longer felt like a star trying to escape a jar.

It felt like a tide-pool with the entire ocean folded cleverly into it.

Still vast.

Still dangerous.

But moving in loops instead of trying to exist everywhere at once.

His throat closed.

“She saved me,” he whispered.

The inner wave nudged him.

We saved each other; came the impression. Don’t get dramatic about it.

Too late.

He covered his eyes with his palm and laughed weakly through tears anyway.

Maritha let him have a minute.

Then she pushed herself to her feet with a groan.

“Your other idiots will be here soon,” she said. “My son has probably threatened to swim the whole bay by now. The green-haired girl nearly took my door off its hinges when she woke and found you gone.”

Arken looked up fast.

“Alina—”

“Still furious, still in love, still alive,” Maritha said dryly. “The demon girl is ready to declare war on the concept of sacrifice itself. The Demon Queen is pretending this is all very tedious and not at all emotionally compromising. It will be a full house.”

He sagged in relief.

“Good,” he said hoarsely. “I was... worried I’d lost more than just...”

He trailed off, swallowing.

The pool’s surface rippled gently.

You lost nothing, Seris murmured inside him. *You gained a very opinionated conscience.*

He snorted.

“Yeah,” he said aloud. “That sounds about right.”

Maritha moved toward the door, then paused.

“Oh,” she added casually, “and one more thing.”

He glanced up.

“Yes?”

She gave him a look that was half stern, half something warmer.

“Next time you decide to rewrite your own anatomy and drag half the sea into your chest,” she said, “maybe consider warning your family first.”

He blinked.

“...Family?”

She shrugged, turning away so he wouldn’t see the way her mouth twitched.

“Closest thing I’ve got to an extra son,” she muttered. “Don’t make me regret investing.”

The word hit harder than any punch the Dark Elf had thrown.

Family.

He sat there a long moment after she left, listening to the waves, the quiet new rhythm of his own Pulse, and the faint, steady presence of Seris humming under his heart.

He was still exhausted.

He was still scared.

His limits were still real—sleep, food, the threat of being blindsided, the weight of responsibility.

But his vessel held.

He was not alone in it.

And somewhere above, in a city built on docks and rumor, people he'd nearly died for were probably already fighting over who got to hug him first.

“...All right,” Arken whispered to himself, dragging in a deep, salt-soaked breath.

“Round two.”

The sea inside him smiled.

And for the first time since the Dark Elf's fist had hit his face, the world felt—if not safe—then at least survivable again

Epilogue — Tides in a Cage

Arken woke to the sound of waves that weren't there.

Up, a voice murmured in the dark of his skull. Come on, shore-walker. You've slept through enough disasters.

He flinched awake.

Low ceiling. Rough wooden beams. The smell of salt and boiled herbs. A chair leg creaking nearby. Definitely not a battlefield. Definitely not a demon fortress.

His whole body felt... wrong.

Not broken — finished. Like someone had taken him apart and put him back together with instructions only they could read.

He tried to sit up.

Pain didn't stab. It groaned through his bones, the kind of deep, rebuilding ache you get after pushing a muscle past every warning sign and then sleeping for twelve hours on a bad mattress.

A hand pressed gently to his shoulder.

"Easy," Jean's mother said. "You'll tear the stitching the world just did on you."

Arken blinked until her face came into focus.

Lines of exhaustion had carved themselves deeper around her eyes. There was sea-salt on her sleeves and something like grief sitting heavy in the corners of her mouth.

Behind her, Jean was half-asleep in a chair, head tipped back, tail limp. Alina sat on the floor with her back against the wall, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes swollen like she'd cried herself out and then kept going. Sinthia leaned in the doorway, mask of bored detachment cracked just enough to show the red at the edges of her gaze.

"Hi," Arken croaked.

Alina's head snapped up.

"Arken," she breathed, already halfway to him before she stopped herself, like she was afraid he'd break if she touched him too fast.

Jean jerked awake, blinked, then swore under his breath and scrubbed a hand over his face.

"You're alive," he said, like he didn't quite trust the sentence yet.

Obviously, the voice in Arken's head said dryly. I did not sign up for a one-sided haunting.

Arken froze.

"Seri?" he whispered.

Everyone went quiet at once.

Even the street outside seemed to hold its breath.

He looked around the room, searching for a pool, a shadow, a shimmer — anything that said ancient sea monster turned possessive guardian turned sacrifice.

Nothing.

Just walls. Just people.

Just the ache in his chest where something else now lived.

Jean's mother — Maritha, his brain supplied fuzzily — exhaled very slowly.

“She told me this would be the first thing you asked,” she said. “And that I was not allowed to lie.”

Her voice was tired in the way storms are tired when they finally break.

“You were... gone,” she said. “Weeks before. The fight, the void... Your body kept trying to exist and unexist at the same time. Pulse tearing through human bone like it didn’t understand the word limit.”

He remembered flashes — the Dark Elf’s fist, the cracking of space, falling through nothing that felt like everything. Then the brutal, constant sensation of being erased and redrawn.

“She dragged you here,” Maritha went on. “Through the trenches. Through currents that would pulp ships. Carried you in her arms like a child and put you on my floor.”

Her gaze went distant for a heartbeat, like she was seeing it again.

“She said, ‘Fix him.’” Maritha’s mouth twisted. “I told her I couldn’t. That this wasn’t... sickness. This was the world trying to decide what you were. Mortal or myth.”

Alina’s fingers dug into her own arms.

“What did she do?” Arken asked.

He already knew.

He just needed to hear it out loud so his guilt had somewhere to land.

Maritha looked him straight in the eyes.

“She offered herself,” she said. “Not as a vessel. Not as a familiar. As a brace.”

Jean swallowed.

“She wouldn’t let anyone else in the circle,” he said hoarsely. “Not me. Not Alina. Not Sinthia. Said mortals would burn. Said this was ‘sea business.’”

Sinthia’s jaw clenched.

“She threatened to drown anyone who argued,” she muttered. “Even me. I believed her.”

Maritha nodded once.

“We drew the circle,” she said. “Salt. Old ink. A few favors I was saving for my own funeral. She stood in it barefoot, dripping, and put her hand on your chest. You were still... flickering. Here, gone, here, gone.”

She closed her eyes for a moment.

“When we began, the house shook,” she said. “Her core — that ancient, deep thing — unwound itself like a tide turning inside out. She braided it into you. Not your mana. Your pattern. Where you end and the world begins.”

Her gaze grew sharp again.

“You screamed,” she told Arken. “She didn’t.”

Arken’s hands curled in the blanket.

“And now?” he asked, voice barely there. “Where is she?”

Annoyingly present, the voice said dryly. You’re very loud when you think, did you know that?

He flinched again.

Jean’s mother answered anyway.

“Everywhere you are,” she said. “Nowhere else.”

Alina’s breath hitched.

“You mean she can’t... the ocean...?” Her words tangled.

Maritha shook her head.

"There's no body left to climb out of the water with," she said. "No separate self to swim the trenches. What's left of Seris is threaded through your being, boy. Voice. Instinct. Pressure. If you walk inland and never see the sea again, she still comes with you."

"So she saved him," Sintia said quietly, "by putting herself in a cage and throwing away the key."

The room went silent again.

Arken stared at his own hands like they belonged to a thief.

"Why would you do that?" he whispered, not sure if he was asking the room or the presence in his skull.

Because you are infuriating, Seris's voice answered. It was warmer now, closer, like she was sitting on the edge of his consciousness with her feet in a river. And because when the world tries to erase something that has finally decided to live, you do not stand by and watch. You dive.

He pressed his lips together, eyes burning.

"I wanted you to be free," he thought back at her, clumsy with the new shape of it. He had no idea if he was doing it right. "In your own water. Your own sky."

I was free for a very long time, she said. Longer than your little mortal brain likes to think about. I slept. I hunted. I guarded. I grumbled. It was... fine.

A pause.

It was also lonely.

That hit harder than any punch.

Alina saw his expression shift and stepped closer, fingertips brushing the back of his hand.

"Is she... talking to you?" she asked, voice trembling between hope and hurt.

He nodded once.

"She says she picked this," he managed. "Knowing she'd never feel the deep like before."

Alina's eyes filled.

"Idiot," she whispered — not at Seris, at him, at the world, at everything. "You keep collecting women who throw themselves into impossible things for you."

Sinthia snorted wetly.

"Trust me, some of us are more 'falling' than 'throwing,'" she muttered, wiping her cheek with the heel of her hand. "Don't tell her I cried. She'll never let me live it down."

Too late, Seris murmured in Arken's head. Tell the horned one that if she cries at my non-funeral, I expect offerings. Preferably interesting gossip.

A small, strangled laugh escaped him.

Jean blew out a breath, shoulders slumping.

"For what it's worth," he said quietly, "if she hadn't... you'd be a crater and a rumor. King Renard is already pretending this was all a contained 'mana anomaly.' Zeno's scribes are drawing thirty contradictory diagrams. The demon queen is pretending she's totally calm about a god-tier brawl at her border." He gave Arken a tired half-smile. "The only reason any of them can pretend is because you're still here to scare them."

Arken looked at Maritha.

"You did the ritual," he said. "You could've refused her."

She held his gaze without flinching.

"I could've," she said. "But I've watched oceans longer than you've been alive. When a tide like that decides its course, you don't waste time arguing. You help it not take the coast with it."

She touched his forehead, surprisingly gentle.

"She didn't ask for forgiveness," Maritha added. "She asked for one thing only."

"What?" Arken whispered.

"That when you mourn her," Maritha said, "you mourn her as a woman who chose. Not as a tool that got used up."

The words cracked something open.

Tears slid hot down Arken's face, and this time he didn't try to scrub them away.

In his mind, Seris sighed like surf over sand.

Finally, she said softly. There. That's better. Grieve properly, or I'll haunt your dreams with lectures about water temperature.

He laughed through the tears, half-sobbing.

"I don't know how to repay this," he said aloud.

"You don't," Jean said. "You live with it."

Alina leaned in and pressed her forehead against his.

"We carry her too," she said. "In stories. In jokes. In that ridiculous pool we're never taking out of the yard."

Sinthia sniffed.

"And whenever we take a bath, we pour out a little water first," she said. "For the lady who could've drowned us all and chose to babysit instead."

Accepted, Seris said. But I reserve the right to complain about your shampoo choices.

Arken breathed in slowly.

His aura stirred — and for the first time, he felt the difference.

The same endless green ocean of power, but now there was a line of deeper color running through it, a seam of cool, patient blue-green. The sensation of pressure in the back of his mind no longer felt like it was trying to crush him. It felt like someone standing behind him with both hands on his shoulders, steadyng, not pushing.

"I'll make room for you," he whispered inward. "Everywhere I go. Even if you never touch the sea again."

Don't be dramatic, she replied. Every time you heal, every time you pull someone back from breaking instead of letting them shatter, that's my ocean. It's enough.

He nodded, more to himself than anyone else.

Then he looked up at the small, crowded room — at Alina's red eyes, Jean's exhausted relief, Sinthia's crooked, defiant grief, Maritha's steady, salt-worn hands.

“I want a real mourning,” he said suddenly. “Not just this. Later. When I can stand for more than five minutes. On the seawall. With proper offerings. And stupid stories. And bad singing.”

Alina smiled through her tears.

“I can do the bad singing,” she said.

Jean sighed. “I’ll bring the good whiskey.”

Sinthia flicked her hair back. “I’ll bring all the embarrassing things she told me about you three.”

Oh, this I approve of, Seris said. Carry on.

Arken let his head fall back against the pillow, a tired, raw, almost peaceful weight settling in his chest.

He wasn’t just an overpowered anomaly anymore.

He was carrying a piece of an ancient life that had willingly folded itself into his.

And for however long this second existence lasted, he was going to make damn sure it was a life Seris could look out through his eyes and say, with that infuriating little smirk:

Worth it.

Outside, somewhere beyond the walls of Saltwake, the sea moved as it always had.

But in one small house filled with too many people and not enough chairs, the tide had found a new shape.

And in the quiet between heartbeats, if Arken listened just right, he could hear it.

Not waves.

Not storms.

Just a steady, stubborn pulse.

His.

And hers.

Together.