

Through the Storm  
A Prequel to  
The Chronicles of Agarthia



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## PART ONE - THE WORLD AS IT WAS



## Chapter 1 Rowida

*I*t couldn't be as easy as this. Rowida turned the idea in her head several times, just a touch, and she could be the most powerful of the greens.

But what if they found out? She was not willing to face the Great Hall, they were merciless.

She laughed a short laugh, then stifled it as fast as she started it; it was ironic that she feared them, she was merciless too.

Rowida looked out from her hiding place. People were milling about, living their normal lives, content with what the fates granted them as their share in this world. Not Rowida though, she hated she could never join the council, let alone be the ruler of the city.

Only the most powerful of the greens were accepted in the council, the responsibilities of keeping the city running was always decided by the ones with the most powerful Vrill, and they justified this rule of supremacy by stating that through their way, they could always pass understanding through their gift to the thousands of residents, and they also pushed the argument they were the most powerful, so, their confusion blast could be used to safe keep the city against all mal-intent.

Rowida didn't care for the understanding part of her Vrill. Her innate powers granted through her green Aura, she didn't want people to understand her, she felt even if she used her Vrill to this end, they would treat her as they would a pet, or a child.

Although it had its uses, mostly for others, she cared mostly for the ability to cause confusion. She always thought it was a formidable weapon if used to its potential.

She had grand dreams, and only recently, Rowida found the means to make them come true.

She could join the council, or better still, become the ruler of Zarzura. Her mind swam in the after-effects of her vision, and a smile drew itself on her delicate features. In her vision, she would not stop at being the ruler, for if she had the Vrill to back it, she would be the ruler of all Agartha, and maybe even the legendary upper world as well.

Until a week ago, her world was dreary, and her vision didn't exist, for she was to accept the role given to her, a lowly water detector for hire. Or as the council told her on arrival to the city

from the school of Nafoura, “Your Vrill is weak, but fear not young lady, you have a place in the community. You will start as a water finder apprentice and serve your nation.”

She remembered the looks of pity on the council member’s faces as they passed their verdict, but what did they know of her powers to organize and lead? Nothing. They judged her Vrill and sealed her fate to a lowly job for the rest of her existence without a second thought.

Her head swam with memories, and how events of her past education molded and sculpted her dreams.

When she was studying in Nafoura, she was the best at sword fighting, the best at archery, and over her nine years at the school, she became a coveted member even by far senior team leaders in the quarterly games of the school.

By the time she became one of the senior students herself, she became a team leader herself, one who others aspired to.

When she became a member of the house of The Falcons, the building reserved for the older students, she was the leader of one of the game teams of her house, maybe the best team, the Dragons, as she always won every game she led her team in. But, this city killed her dreams, crushed her brilliant soul, they ignored her achievements at Nafoura, as her stature was too small and delicate to join the fighting force. Plus, the Greens depended even more on the power of their Vrill than on their skills at militant combat.

Rowida hated her life then, she even considered moving out after her apprenticeship finished, to one of the Green villages far away from Zarzura, the city which killed her every single day. She assumed that she might amount to something in one of those small villages, where most residents had a weaker Vrill than hers, at least she could become the leader of the guard of one of those backwater farmer havens.

She reasoned then, being somebody in a small village is far better than being nobody in the great city. But this all changed a week ago as if the fates knew of her real value and decided to lend a helping hand. She was sent to help a village establish a new well, using her Vrill to find water, and as the workers started digging, she felt the pull of a powerful Arcanos, one which the workers at the well dug out, thought that it was a petrified branch and just cast aside, clearing the earth for their work.

But she knew it was an Arcanos and she knew that it had great power.

Rowida secretly took the Arcanos later that day, washed it thoroughly, clearing the mud-encrusted solid shell over it; it took her hours of work, but finally, the prize laid in her hands, a glass staff with an orb at each end.

Rowida felt the potential of the staff and knew it was the means of getting out of her dreary life, whether by using it for whatever use it held or at selling it to have enough wealth to go up the ladder of society. She reasoned through selling the staff, she could at least start a trade or own a

farm or something. Anything was better than a water finder for hire, traveling the forests of Agartha in search of work.

She spent every spare moment of her time, any moment she could escape her lousy apprenticeship in the library, searching among the history of every major Arcana, going through the histories of the land, even reading poems, lore and half-truths, which might include some mention of certain Major and Minor Arcana. And she was finally rewarded by her meticulous search, the staff was described in great detail in the ballad of the Black Empress. It was mentioned in one part of the long poem, as the Reaper of souls, and in another as the Staff of Death.

What she had in her hand was an Arcanos so unique, no one ever knew of its likeness.

According to the poem, it was used to harvest the Aura of others, and deposit it as a supplement to the wielder of the staff, a sure way to double the power of her Vrill, maybe even triple, or even make it infinitely stronger, making her a Goddess among Ants.

A plan started to form in Rowida's mind, a plan to become a Goddess.

She had been coming to this spot for the last week, waiting for a chance to use the staff, and all she had to do was find someone gullible enough for her to let the staff touch both their foreheads, and she would steal their Soul, or Aura, or whatever —she didn't really care as long as it doubled her Vrill.

And she believed she found her perfect victim, the son of one of the merchants who took a liking to her, one who she has been watching vigilantly through the past two days. She learned from the surveillance of the young man he had to go to the warehouse to replenish wares he and his father sold, at least twice a day, and he spent around an hour away each time. Rowida even followed him one time to the warehouse, where the young man stood long to get a chew of dogrot before he collected the wares and went on his way.

Dogrot was known to cause a daze, and even to put some people to sleep if they abused it. In fact, she heard in one of the villages about a woman who died from swallowing the stuff, as people usually chewed on it then spit it out when its juices were consumed.

It was her best opportunity thus far, and she decided to act on it today.

Just as the young man left his father's stand, she followed, and as they went through the marble-covered streets of Zarzura. Excitement filled Rowida's heart and made her almost on the verge of laughing with giddiness.

When the young man arrived at his destination, he looked down and up the street of the warehouse to ensure there was nobody to see him, as the habit of using dogrot was frowned upon by most inhabitants of the city, then he brought out a pack of the greenish-brown plant and pushed a bit in his mouth.

When he was already showing signs of relaxing, and his shoulders slumped over from the effects of the plant, Rowida came out of her hiding spot and approached him. "Hello Mathias,"



she said as she walked slowly towards him, deliberately pushing her heels in every step, making her look as if she was swaying towards him.

“Rowida.”

Rowida watched Mathias gulp the dogrot immediately. Its sweet incense-like smell was quite recognizable, something Rowida was thankful for.

“What brings you here?” His whole body shivered a bit.

“I followed you here.” Rowida was panting from the excitement as she spoke, then she came very near to Mathias. “I have been waiting for a moment like this for days.”

“Really?” Mathias swallowed hard.

He moved from one foot to the other, leaned on the door frame of the warehouse, and said, “You were waiting for us to be alone?”

“Oh, yes.” Rowida was almost touching the young man with her body as she spoke. “I had something which I wanted to share with you, only you.”

Mathias smiled a large smile and said, “Would you like some dogrot?” He fumbled in his pocket and produced the small pack. “I have enough for both of us.”

“Maybe you should chew on some.” Rowida passed her fingers softly on his face and rested on his chin. “What I have will bring immense pleasure, it is a rare Arcanos, and it will make you a different man after using it.”

“Then bring it out,” Mathias said as he pushed another bite of dogrot in his mouth. “Let’s enjoy life for as long as we can.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Rowida said and giggled, then she said, “Kneel down.”

Mathias eagerly kneeled and looked to Rowida, who followed suit and kneeled facing him. Then she got the staff she had hidden in her skirt and touched it to Mathias’s forehead and hers. Soon, the staff started to glow, and the glow started to get stronger. Mathias screamed, “I don’t feel like it is bringing any pleasure, I feel that my soul is sucked out of my body, stop it, Rowida.”

She pushed him back against the door frame and said firmly, “Be still, you will feel the pleasure soon.”

The staff glowed so brightly Rowida feared it would alert people around, but at that very moment, the glow changed to green and became a dim throb.

Then the staff stopped glowing completely.

Rowida stood up drunkenly and balanced from one foot to the other till she finally stood straight.

She looked at Mathias's fainted form and kneeled down on him. She opened his mouth, pushed the dogrot down his throat, then as an afterthought, covered his mouth and nose with both of her hands.

Mathias jerked violently for a minute or so, then he completely relaxed and stopped breathing.

Rowida stood up with a big smile on her face, she felt her new Aura, and it was strong.

She hid the staff in her skirt and walked away.

## Chapter 2 Banished

“Rowida Verdum,” the councilwoman addressed Rowida, whose limbs were tied down with special cuffs supplied by the purple mages. “Your crimes are unprecedented. You are the worst criminal to be ever judged in the history of this council. We have never seen anyone as ruthless as you, not even in the legends and lore of Agarthia.”

Rowida laughed a long throaty laugh in response.

“You killed seven men and four women in less than a month, including three of our most adept guards and your own mentor.” The councilwoman spoke in a firm melodic voice.

“She had it coming,” Rowida spat. “She was always taunting me about my low status.”

“What was bad about your status?” Another councilman addressed Rowida with rumbling tones. “You had a good life with the other apprentices, three meals a day, and a future in mineral detection to keep you well-to-do for the rest of your days. It is a life most people would have fought to have, a meal in their bellies whenever they need, and a roof over their heads for the entirety of their lives.”

“I don’t want to be well-fed,” screamed Rowida, then scoffed. “I was special at Nafoura, but you refused to recognize this unless I had a powerful Vrill. You can’t blame me then for procuring that Vrill.”

“By stealing the souls of others?” The councilwoman said, with disdain filling her words. “Such a low and heinous act, just to satisfy your own greed and hunger for power, an act as merciless as we have never heard of.”

“But you did.” Rowida smiled viciously as she spoke. “It is right there in the ballad of the Black Empress.”

“Do you mean the mythical tales of the worst character in our lore? Malachi the terrible is a man who will always be remembered as a betrayer to the entire populace of Agarthia.”

Another councilman said, “A man remembered for only his evil deeds, and even if the ballad was true, it happened two thousand years ago.”

“Yet his line ruled Agarthia for nine hundred years,” Rowida said as she laughed. “History be damned. Malachi the Terrible was a man with a vision, one which united all the warring tribes of this land.”

“Enough of this,” the head of the council, and ruler of the land shouted at the assemblage and at Rowida. “We have been deliberating on the way to punish you, and we settled on one.”

The ruler raised his voice as he said, “We will strip you of all of your stolen Aura, and almost all of yours, leaving you just enough to survive the procedure.” He shook his head sadly, and said, “We didn’t want to do this, but you can’t be allowed to live in Agarth, you set a horrible example of how a green should live. So, in addition to stripping you of your Aura, we employed a purple mage to compel you to go to the surface world, forever banished from ours.”

Rowida’s screams resounded on the council’s walls as a purple mage approached her with a small cube, another unique and powerful Arcanos. She felt its power instantly when he placed it on her forehead.

There was no glow this time, not like with the staff, just a low whine and wafts of smoke rising from Rowida’s body. Then the mage made intricate moves with his metal rod, the one all purples carry to concentrate the forces of nature to do their miracles, and he whispered a few words in her ears.

Two guards approached her and removed her cuffs, and she couldn’t resist going step after step out of the council hall, down the streets of Zarzura, and towards the gate.

The guards opened the gates for her to leave, and she just marched on.

Rowida cried hot tears as she ate fruits and drank water from the spring she slept beside last night. For three weeks, she had to walk westwards, only stopping when hunger was too much to bear, and sleep was too strong to overcome.

They gave her one canteen of water and a knife, and if not for her survival instinct, she would have died twenty times over.

She had bad blisters on her feet, joined by pains in her knees and hips, but still, the pain coming from the compelling spell was ten times worse.

She couldn’t resist the urge long, she had to stand up and walk, or else, the pains would attack every inch of her body.

For some obscure reason, all magical creatures avoided her, her only challenges were big cats or the occasional wolf, and she could manage those. She didn’t know whether it was her diminished aura, or the spell put on her by the purple mage which pushed the magical creatures away, but she was resentful of this fact with all her being, she would have welcomed a swift death against an unbeatable opponent far more than her horrible existence.

She stood up and started to walk, forever westwards.

Rowida didn't know which day was this since she was banished, but winter came and went during the period she walked, forever heading towards some point in the west.

She no longer cried her fate. As of recent, she felt almost nothing, no hate, no fear, nothing. She also grew far stronger physically, her legs, and her arms were now twice the size they were since she left Zarzura.

For the last five days, she traveled in the shadow of an immense mountain, and her urge was leading her continuously towards its base.

Today, she was almost at the base, and she assumed that a portal of some kind would be present there to take her to the surface world. She walked on, she couldn't do anything else, as she was not hungry, nor sleepy, and the compelling spell was controlling her like a puppet to walk whenever she could.

Rowida suddenly saw a shimmering object at the base of the mountain as she walked closer. She sighed and approached the shining spot, as she reasoned this could be her way out of Agartha. She resolutely walked to it and entered through it.

There was a moment Rowida felt she was stripped of her body, then just as fast, she was standing in a bustling city, a large square where many women in different stages of pregnancy walked around together.

The compelling spell seemed to have ceased to affect her, and she stood for a moment, feeling relief washing over her.

"We have been expecting you," a woman spoke to Rowida as she walked across the square towards her. "A message was sent eighteen months ago to receive you and facilitate your journey forward."

"Where am I?" Rowida asked the woman as she gazed at familiar architecture, one which she couldn't place from memory.

"You are in Beimini, the nursery half of Beimini, that is." The woman smiled gently.

### Chapter 3 The city of Beimini

Rowida was not sure what she could do after the week of rest they allowed her to have. She didn't want to travel to the surface world in her state. She still couldn't feel anything properly, as if something was missing from everything she tasted and did.

The sensation of missing something grew along her journey as if it settled on her body like a blanket, and recently, it was governing all her feelings and emotions.

Yesterday, when she arrived at Beimini, they offered her a feast of a meal, nothing like foraging on fruits and the occasional rodent which fell in her way. But even though the food filled her stomach and renewed her strength, it lacked in taste and texture. She knew the different items and remembered their taste from the past, and something was missing in all of them.

If she had the emotion, she would have cried, but she was empty, and she reasoned along her long journey maybe she needed to experience things to the extreme to actually feel them.

She sighed as she put on her clothes and left the room they gave her. Even though she was not compelled anymore to walk on, she still needed to walk, it was an essential part of her routine for so long, and she needed it, at least to think on her next step.

Rowida walked out of the building and was astounded by the number of pregnant women as well as women holding small children and walking with toddlers around the place; there was not a single man in sight.

The woman who received her yesterday, told her she was Mariah, and as Master Dalmatius was responsible for the other half of Beimini, she was responsible for this part; if Rowida was her old self she would have entertained a line of thought about the vast difference between the two people, laughing and enjoying the irony of it, but she was not, she just felt indifferent. But she decided to pursue the woman anyway, maybe talking to her would ease the feeling of loss which controlled her entire being.

As she crossed the city's main square, she had at least a dozen small children running, laughing and giggling around her. None of them cared for her weather roughened features or the state of her clothes. They just gave her innocent smiles of admiration as they passed around her.

She followed them with her eyes, a strange feeling stirring inside of her, and for the next minutes, she just stood, watching this particular group of children play around the square.

A soft tap to her shoulder brought her from her trance state. She turned fast to find Mariah smiling softly at her. "You like children?"

"Never really thought about them." Rowida turned again to watch the children play chase. "I guess I was too busy trying to prove myself to have ever thought of them."

"They are a treasure every woman should at least experience once." Mariah touched Rowida's shoulder gently. "Maybe when you will be on the topside, you might consider having one."

Rowida looked intently at the woman, but her senses for the desires of others, went with her aura, and she couldn't read Mariah at all.

"This group is special though." Mariah pointed to the playing children. "They are all orphans, their mothers passed away during childbirth."

Again, a strange sensation moved deep inside Rowida. If she was back to her old self, she would have called it warmth, now, it was just a vague unknown sensation. "Who cares for them then?" she asked.

"All of us." Mariah led Rowida towards the children. "Just the lightest of touches to their souls, and they give you a flood of love, asking nothing in return but the least of your attention."

A boy played with a twig on the ground, drawing curving lines and circles. He was so deep in his art, he didn't notice either woman approaching him.

"Ethan." Mariah touched his head softly, and the boy turned to give her a radiant smile. "What are you doing today?"

"Hello, Mrs. Mariah." Ethan raised his head with a smile "I am drawing a great city. It is called Dreamlandia," he said.

Something ignited in Rowida, and it lingered for more than a moment, for a whole minute, she could feel warmth in her heart.

"Hello, I am Rowida." Rowida knelt next to the boy and smiled.

"Hello, Rowida." The boy extended his hand to her. "Pleased to meet you."

"Can I draw with you?" Rowida wanted the warmth to visit her heart again, maybe it would linger this time.

"Sure." Ethan gave her a twig and said, "You can draw the trees around the castle. Trees would be nice for the people to see from the towers."

Mariah gave Rowida a concerned look, and reached to pull her away from the boy, but stopped short.

"I guess you can keep each other company for the next hour," Mariah said as she looked at Rowida. "Then I will come back to take Ethan to his alphabet lessons."

"Of course," Rowida answered fast. "We will be here."

An hour passed, and all throughout it, Rowida laughed and played with Ethan, and every time the boy laughed or smiled, the warmth came, for a few moments, or a minute, but it came, and she felt more alive than she had in months.

Mariah came towards them, first with a concerned look, then a smile started to grow on her face as she approached them.

“I see you have made a new friend Ethan,” Mariah said smiling at Ethan.

“Yes, Rowida is very nice.” Ethan nodded, then he frowned and added, “But she can’t draw at all, especially not trees.”

“I have to take Rowida away now.” Mariah reached and touched Rowida’s shoulder firmly. “Do you need anything before you go to the alphabet lesson?” she asked Ethan.

Rowida felt pain clenching her heart, one that she didn’t feel since they passed judgment on her, and for a second, her soul was stripped from her all over again.

“Can Rowida come back to play with me after I finish my lessons?” Ethan had pleading in his eyes as he held his twig firmly in front of him—a shield from the rejections of the world.

“Rowida is an adult, she might have other things to do with her time, besides, she also has to attend lessons of her own,” Mariah said.

“Ethan.” Rowida held his shoulders firmly, “If I have the time, I would be more than honored to spend it with you.”

Mariah gave her a warning look and shook her head.

“Bye, Ethan,” Rowida kneeled quickly and kissed the boy’s forehead. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Mariah pulled gently on Rowida’s shoulder, then both women moved away from the small boy.

“Can’t I spend more time with him?” Rowida pleaded with Mariah.

“You will leave soon, and he will be left here questioning why you left him.” Mariah sighed. “It is better for him and for you to end it at this point.”

Mariah pulled Rowida to one of the many squat buildings near the entrance of the city. “You have to attend some lectures about the surface world, we are not monsters, you will be sent as prepared as we can help it.”

Rowida woke up to the fact that she had to leave in less than a week, sighed, and walked resignedly with the older woman.



## Chapter 4 Violet

Rowida passed the next two days in preparation, She was lectured about the political structure of the world above. From the most recent reports, it was a warlord's dream come true as it was explained to her.

Women were not treated with the same equality and reverence as they did here, but they got through with life, holding important roles in society.

She was given parchments to help her start to understand the tongues used there, something that would have not been needed if she retained her aura with its Vrill to understand the languages of others. She was also given a pack of clothes, as they told her the sun of the surface is harsher, yet the winters are far colder than in Agarthia.

She laid in her bed, silent, trying to pull sleep to her aid, but a year and a half of being used to sleep due to extreme exhaustion didn't help. She turned around in the bed until she was facing the ceiling, then she sat up and pulled the bound parchments and read for a time.

"Hello, Rowida." A voice from her left made her jump out of bed.

To her left, a woman of around middle years stood with a smile.

"Who are you? And when did you enter my room?" Rowida felt the vague sensations of anger almost catching her in its grasp, then it was gone."

"I am someone who is interested in helping you." The woman moved slowly towards the end of the bed and sat. "As for how I entered your room, doors and walls represent nothing to me and to my people."

Rowida gaped at the woman's declaration, then a far remote memory clicked in her head, something from her studies in Nafoura, a lifetime ago. "You are one of the Others," Rowida said in a low voice.

"Indeed, this is what your kind calls us," The woman smiled radiantly. "I get it that you also know of our deals?"

"No, never heard of any deals." Rowida sat next to the woman, and for a second, as she adjusted her posture, her hand passed through the ethereal being beside her.

"Well, if you were a yellow, you would have heard about our deals," the woman said.

"I am not interested." Rowida laid on the bed. "I have no aura to benefit from your deals."

Although the woman was ethereal and earlier Rowida's hand went through her as if nothing was there, she reached and firmly pulled Rowida from the bed.

"This is precisely why I came to you." The smile on the woman's face disappeared and was replaced by a grim and serious tightened lips. "I am offering you a deal where you will not only get your aura and Vrill back, but you will be one of the greatest figures in Agarthan history, a feared conqueror and a formidable army commander."

Something old and dark stirred in Rowida at the woman's touch, scary and rotten, but for Rowida, it was better than the void in her heart.

"Alright, tell me of your deal." Rowida sat straight on the bed. "But first, what is your name?"

"You may call me Miss Violet." The smile returned to Violet's face, ten folds more radiant.

"I understand the deal now," Rowida scoffed. "And I think it is very strange, you get a part of a soul which I don't have, in return for giving me back my soul."

"Exactly," Violet said as she produced a wooden looking card from her dress. Surprisingly, it was solid through and through. "And now all you have to do is place a drop of your blood on the contract and it becomes binding."

Rowida took the card from Violet's hand, turned it over to check the other side, and all she saw was the intricate design engraved on it.

"This contract has no writing, only designs." Rowida kept turning the card in her hand. "And it looks like a tarot card, only without a face."

"It is a destiny card, for you and for me it is our binding contract." Violet smiled radiantly as she eyed Rowida, rubbing the card over and over. "As, for the writing, it will only appear after the signing, if the writing doesn't match what I said, you can just immediately nullify it."

"How can I nullify it?" Rowida stopped fiddling with the card and stared at Violet intently.

"Using another drop of blood." Violet kept her smile, beaming at Rowida. "But you have to know this, if you don't nullify it within one hour of signing it, it becomes binding."

"So, I have a single hour to decide on such an important matter?"

A thrill ran through Rowida's body, to be gone in a moment, then she grabbed the corner of the card and pushed it against her thumb. "I like having some thrill in my life."

As soon as Rowida's blood touched the corner of the card, it started to grow in her hand till it reached the size of full-sized parchment, and words started to draw themselves on it.

In less than a minute, the whole face of the wooden parchment was filled with the wording of the 'Deal'.

Rowida was well versed in trade treaties and contracts. She had aspired to find a future in rulership, and as she read the contract, it was exactly what Violet said. She nodded her approval and said, "I don't need an hour, it is good, at least as far as I stand, a soulless woman."

"Good, now listen." Violet had a hungry look in her eyes as she approached Rowida. "There is a lot to be done before they send you to the surface."

"You mean that the staff is here?" Rowida jumped out of bed.

She had spent the last hours talking to Violet, and even though she didn't get a chance to sleep, she didn't feel the need to.

"Please, keep your composure," Violet told her firmly. "They will give it to you on your last night here. They will ask you to dispose of it on the surface world, not to fall into the hands of anyone who might have the wrong kind of intentions, according to them."

"But I can just take the aura of any of the women milling around the city." Rowida waved her hands in the air. "I can be myself again."

"And then what?" Violet charged her. "How will you leave Beimini? Do you know that only Mariah can open the gate? Did you know that most women here are hardy fighters? Did you even think for a second about the consequences of your decision to go after the staff?"

Rowida stopped pacing and sat hard on the bed. "No, I didn't," she sighed a long and hot sigh. She was feeling a lot of things, she missed in the last year and a half since she made the 'Deal,' but this was not helping her think clearly.

"When it is time to act," "I will tell you," Violet said.

"I appreciate having you by my side, Violet, it makes me feel as if I am alive again."

Rowida tried for a smile, and it didn't feel right, so instead, she laughed a short throaty laugh, which she felt like a memory of pleasure that never had been.

"Now, tell me more about the orphan boy." Violet hovered a few inches above the ground. "I think I would like to meet him."

## Chapter 5 Ethan

Rowida finally went out of her room on the fourth day of arrival at Beimini, and she first went to eat, then she started walking around the city purposefully. In another hour, she happened upon Ethan, who stood with a group of four other children around him.

Rowida listened for a moment and realized that they were playing hide and seek.

She patiently waited till each child chose a hiding spot, followed Ethan and said, "Hello, Ethan." She gave him a warm smile, which she barely felt. "I missed you."

"Rowida." Ethan jumped to hug her. "I missed you too, you have been gone for ages."

"I only saw you two days ago." She smiled, this time a genuine smile. "But I am here now."

"Can you help me hide?" He looked at her with mischief in his eyes. "If I hide the rest of the day, till lunchtime, I will be the spymaster."

Ethan jumped around her while he talked, then he stopped suddenly and kneeled. "Quick, kneel down, Marcus might see us."

She went down as he advised and asked him, "Only for the rest of the day?"

"Well, yes, I have to eat by then," he said excitedly. "And we have rabbit stew today, which is my favorite."

"I also love rabbit stew." Rowida nodded. "I think it is the best, especially served with mashed carrots."

"You too?" Ethan almost squealed. "I love mashed carrots, so much."

"Okay, Ethan, I can't help you hide today." She held him at arm's length. "But in two days, I will prepare food for both of us to hide two full days, if you wanted it."

"That would be amazing," Ethan jumped up, shouting.

A boy shouted from across the square, "I saw Ethan at the corner of Heaven and Bakers."

"Oh, I have been spotted," a crestfallen Ethan said. "I can't stay here, now I have to find the others with Marcus." He left Rowida and ran to join the other boy.

Rowida followed him with her eyes as he raced across the square, a memory of warmth lingered for another few seconds.

"He is special," Violet said directly into Rowida's ear. "So, full of life and potential."

"I feel alive around him, warm as I have never felt." Rowida was cold again, the fleeting warmth that the boy's presence supplied, was gone. "Are you sure nobody in the city can see you?" Rowida turned to face the ethereal woman.

“Only who I chose to see me will.” Violet laughed a long, rich laugh, and said, “Now, even more so, because of our ‘Deal’.”

“Good, so we can go ahead with our plan then.”

“Yes, today, we start.”

Ethan played with his mates until lunchtime, and no one was chosen as the spymaster, a fact which sparked much debate.

“I hid the longest,” a small girl with big brown eyes said.

“No, you didn’t, Farah, I did,” Marcus, the boy who spotted Ethan earlier said.

“None of you hid as much as I did,” a tall skinny boy declared.

“That’s because you went to the classroom and stood there the whole day, David.” Ethan smiled as he pictured having to stay in a classroom the whole day, he liked reading, but he hated having to stay the entire day reading, it was not natural.

“Well, I guess nobody is the spymaster then,” a girl with green eyes and long braid announced to the group. “We should stop fighting and go to lunch.”

“Nobody is fighting, Laura, and we are already on our way to lunch.”

After that, the children walked silently until they reached the common dining hall, which could house hundreds at any time, and was almost three-quarters full now.

Ethan took a plate from the ones already placed near the entrance, balanced it with a tall glass of milk, and headed to their table.

Most children in the hall had mothers with them, except for Ethan’s and a few groups of orphaned children, who joined Miss Mariah at the biggest table in the hall.

Today, to Ethan’s delight, Rowida was sitting next to Mariah, and they were nodding and talking while eating.

As he placed his plate and took his seat, Ethan said, “Hello Miss Mariah, hello, Rowida.” He waved to both of them from his end of the table.

Rowida waved back. “Hello, Ethan,” she said and smiled.

Ethan was about to respond, but he noticed the firm look on Miss Mariah’s face, and he postponed his words until he finished his food.

Minutes after Ethan finished his food, he ran with the mostly empty plate to the table for collecting them at the end of the dining hall, then he rushed back to Rowida.

“I didn’t get to be the spymaster, but I was almost there,” Ethan said to Rowida.

Mariah gave Rowida a warning look, but Rowida said, “You just need to keep going at it.” She touched his head and played with his hair a bit then added, “Practice what you want to perfect, and it will eventually be that, perfect.”

Ethan didn’t understand much of what she said, so he giggled. “I like to play.” He laughed a bit and added, “So, should I play all the time to get good at it?”

Then as he laughed, he looked to check if Miss Mariah approved his words, and as he noticed she was smiling, he was at ease.

“Well, playing for play's sake is not a good example.” Rowida smiled at him as she talked. “You have to pick something that you would like to do for the rest of your life, and this is what you need to practice to perfection.”

Ethan looked at her with big eyes. “I think like the trips to the forest,” he said with awe in his voice. “Can I be perfect at that?”

“You mean trekking?” Rowida asked than answered her question, “Yes, you can be an excellent trekker, there are people who do this as part of a job like hunters or as a guiding job in itself.”

Ethan leaned towards Rowida and said, “I like you.” He had a glow to his eyes. “You understand children more than other adults.”

Then he put his hand on his mouth as he realized that he said this in front of Miss. Mariah, and ran away from both women.

Within minutes, he joined his group of almost the same age children and headed to the classroom for more lessons.

“The boy is getting attached to you,” Mariah said in firm tones. “I urge you to stop doing this to him.”

“How can you ask me such a selfish thing?” Anger bubbled to the surface of the void filling Rowida. “I just acted human around him, nothing less.”

“Yes, but you leave in two days.” Mariah gave Rowida a cold stare. “And you will not be here to witness his pain over your loss.”

“Are you trying to tell me that kindness would kill the boy?” Rowida was getting louder, animated and she stared back at Mariah.

“He receives kindness here, with the rest of the orphaned children.” Mariah stood. “You are bonding with him, and that’s a different story.”

Then she started to walk away, but she turned one last time to look at Rowida. She said, “Don’t think that sending you to the surface is a punishment, there are still more to be exacted of you if you don’t keep away from him.”

Rowida watched Mariah’s retreating form as she walked out of the now-empty dining hall, and even after Mariah left, she kept staring at the opened door.

“Good, you did it perfectly,” Violet said.

“Don’t you think I overdid it?”

“No, you managed it very well.” Violet floated in front of Rowida and said, “Now she will do what we want her to do, thinking she is protecting the boy.”

“I hope this doesn’t turn against us and ruin our plans.” Rowida still stared at the door.

“Trust me, it will be just as I predicted it.” Violet laughed. “You will get what you deserve, my dear, all in due time.”

“I hope this goes without complications.” Rowida sighed. “What you suggested is too much to swallow.”

“But it is just the right amount to swallow, fear not.”

Violet glowed for a moment, then vanished, leaving Rowida alone. She eventually shuffled towards the exit door.

Rowida walked out of her room on her fifth day in Beimini and headed directly to where she saw Ethan play before. As expected, the boy was again drawing in the sand of the side curb.

“Hello, Ethan,” Rowida said softly as she touched Ethan’s shoulder.

“Hey, Rowida.” Ethan jumped up. “Where were you? It has been ages since I last saw you.”

Rowida laughed, a glittering genuine laugh she didn’t feel the like of except in Ethan’s presence. “You have a tendency to exaggerate, but I like it.”

“What does ‘exaggerate’ mean?” Ethan cocked his head and opened his mouth slightly.

“It means making things far bigger than they really are,” Rowida answered him with a smile.

As he was about to speak, she put a finger to his mouth and said, “Listen, Miss Mariah doesn’t want me to spend time with you, I shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

“Why?” Ethan protested. “I like you, Rowida, so much.”

Rowida put a hand to her chin and nodded. “So do I, but we have to hide the fact that we spend time together, or they will kick me out of the city.”

“What? NO.” Ethan stomped the ground hard. “Please don’t go.”

“Okay, I will come as often as I can to play with you, even hide you where none of your friends can find you to become the spymaster.”

She kneeled to his ears level, and said, “But we have to hide our meetings, make this a secret, good enough for a spymaster.”

Ethan had a worried look on his face. “Even from Miss Mariah?”

“Especially from Miss Mariah.” Rowida shook her head fast. “Plus, you wanted to learn trekking? I happen to be a master trekker, walked for a year and a half all across Agarthia.”

“A year and a half? That’s a lot of time.” Ethan’s eyes grew wide, then he started to giggle. “You are trying to trick me because I am small, but I got it.”

“No, honestly, I really walked a full year and a half.” Rowida nodded, sincerely. “And I will tell you all about when it is time for us to hide.”

“Can’t wait to hear it all.” Ethan jumped around Rowida in excitement.

“Now, I have to go.” Rowida stood. “See you tomorrow Ethan.”

She turned once to see the boy still looking at her forlornly.

“I see greatness in your future, Rowida.” Violet again materialized out of thin air beside Rowida.

“Let’s hope your plan works.” Rowida shook her head gently. “I wouldn’t like to experience any worse punishment than stripping my soul out.”

“It will all be fine.” Violet smiled, and the smile seemed to stay as a dark spot in the morning air, even after she disappeared.



## Chapter 6 Hide, and Go Seek

On the sixth day, Rowida intentionally avoided Ethan the entire morning, and even when he ran to her, she shook her head fast and kept walking.

Ethan smiled a knowing smile and ran to join his friends.

By the time Rowida finished eating, Mariah had come to her table. “Thank you for accepting my point of view.” She smiled kindly. “I know that you grew fond of Ethan, and I appreciate your sacrifice.”

“No need to appreciate my actions,” Rowida scoffed. “I didn’t do this for your pleasure. I did it for the benefit of the boy.”

“Still, I wanted you to know something of importance.” Mariah sat facing Rowida. “The portal, which will take you to the surface, will seal immediately after you. You can’t use it to come back.”

“I figured this would be the case.” Rowida laughed. “You wouldn’t want me to come back and disrupt the good life of the citizens of Beimini.”

“Please, listen.” Mariah had a hard expression on her face as she urged Rowida to heed her. “There are tens of portals, and even tunnels, which connect Agartha to the surface, some are not far in between, and some will allow you to come back.”

Rowida opened her eyes wide. “Are you giving me a way to come back?”

“Not exactly, without the magic of an aura inside you, you can’t get access, but I think you already know that.”

“I do,” Rowida smiled as she gazed away from Mariah. “I was a good student of history in Nafoura, I know how our aura and magics built around it works.”

“Good, then know this.” Mariah lowered her voice, “There is a way for you to come back, and it can’t be prevented, not even by the entire council of the purples.”

“I am listening, please continue.”

“If you are with child, pregnant, its aura will give you access, directly to Beimini.” Mariah sighed. “Agarthan babies by ancient tradition and law, belong to Agartha.”

“Even if the father is from the surface?” Rowida leaned closer to whisper to the older woman.

“Yes, the child will still be Agarthan, and if you were in Agarthan, you would have had the call of Beimini.” Mariah had a worried expression as she continued, “Whoever passed the sentence on you, knew of this, and knew of the possibility that you will return as a mother.”

“They must have.” Rowida nodded. “But tell me, after I deliver and the child reaches the age of admittance to Nafoura, then what?”

“I think they will banish you again.” Mariah sighed. “It is not a perfect solution to your problem, only a temporary one, but good for at least seven years in Beimini, which is better than none at all.”

“You seem to know this intimately.”

“I am far older than you might think.” Mariah threw her head in a bout of laughter. “The water of the fountain keeps me young to do my job, You are not the first to be banished, and would not be the last to come back.”

“But once I pass childbearing age, there is no way for me to come back.” Rowida gave a long throaty laugh in her turn. “Worse punishment than stripping my soul, indeed.”

“I am offering you something which might help with that,” Mariah said and pulled a long bamboo flask from the folds of her voluminous dress. “This is concentrated water of Nafoura, good for at least a decade of youth if used regularly, or up to six decades if it is used just to slow the progress of time, not stop it.”

“You are giving this to me?” Rowida’s eyebrows climbed all the way to her forehead, and she felt a warm thrill pass through her inner void.

“Yes, and not because of letting Ethan to his own.” Mariah sighed. “But because even in your almost soulless state, you showed compassion to an orphaned boy, and I believe that you will make a good mother.”

To her surprise, a tear slid down Rowida’s cheek, and all she could say was, “Thank you.”

“Don’t think I will not be here when you come back,” Mariah said as she stood, leaving the flask on the table. “I will be waiting for you, watching you, making sure you never do something bad to this city.”

Then she left.

Rowida stood with a jerk and almost ran to her room.

Once inside, she shouted at the emptiness of the room, “I want to cancel our ‘Deal’.”

“Do you hear me, Violet,” Rowida screamed. “No more schemes and plans, I have a way back, no thanks to you.”

Violet materialized, but not as a woman of around Rowida’s age, she materialized as a roiling and churning violet cloud with thunder and black water in its middle.

“You wretched ignorant girl,” Violet the cloud thundered. “You think that what Mariah did was not a direct result of my plan?”

Rowida cowered at the corner of the room, feeling real fear for the first time in months.

“I planted the seed of approval in her malleable soul.” Violet rolled too close to Rowida that the hair on Rowida’s arm stood electrified. “She was just another pawn in my long game, you arrogant child.”

The fear went away as any other feeling, and Rowida was left with the void. “I am not scared of you. You don’t strike me as all that powerful. You are just air and bad intentions.”

Suddenly, Violet rushed Rowida and engulfed her whole in her mass.

Rowida screamed, but the scream didn’t reach out of her mind to her mouth. She was disassembled to primary concepts of what made her what she was. Floating in the cloud were Rowida’s eyes, and they stared out in shock at her mouth, which was wrapped by lightening in the vast space, which was Violet.

Pieces and bits of her mind floated around, dreams and hopes bubbled in shades of green, fear and nightmares floated in shades of grey, her arms and her legs raced after each other with no purpose.

“I am all-powerful.” A deep voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. “I am all there was, and all there will be.”

Then Rowida dropped out of Violet, panting and crying. She was whole again, but she felt that something was left inside the vastness of Violet, something important, but she didn’t remember what it was, perhaps a memory or a past emotion, now lost to Violet.

Violet, the cloud, started to coalesce and stood in front of Rowida as the woman she knew her for as long as their ‘Deal’ was enacted.

“I told you,” Violet said in a soft voice, “you have only an hour after the contract is signed.” She sighed. “Neither you nor I can change a word in it now, and it will remain binding as long as the terms of the ‘Deal’ are not met.”

Rowida continued crying, curled around herself on the floor.

“Rise Rowida,” Violet said firmly. “We still have a lot to do before this day is done.”

“Can we leave the boy?” Rowida raised her head, and a shiver went through her entire body. “Please?”

“No, we can’t.” Violet shook her head. “He has to serve his role, so much hangs on this.”

“But he is innocent and sweet, and I don’t think I want to harm him by dragging him to a dangerous new world.” Rowida cried hot searing tears, as her whole body shook with every word.

“See, it this way.” Violet touched Rowida’s forehead gently, as gentle as the touch of a soft breeze. “He will be your new small brother, facing the hardships of the world as much as you, always balancing you and your urges.”

“So, you will not harm him?” Rowida stopped crying, but her breathing was still ragged, and her body still shook, with the occasional moan and hiccup coming out against her will.

“As long as it is in my ability, I will never harm him.” Violet glowed like the sun for a moment, then the glow ebbed, and she said, “He is more important than you think.”

“Hello, Ethan.” Mariah approached the kneeling Ethan, as usual deep in his drawings. “How are you doing?”

“Fine, Miss Mariah.” Ethan left his drawing twig and smiled at Mariah.

“Good.” Mariah smiled, patted his head, and said, “I am glad that you are.”

Then she walked away from the boy.

As she turned the square and was gone from sight, Rowida rushed from her hiding place near the edge of the road. “See, she didn’t even see me or doubt my presence.”

“Amazing,” Ethan squealed. “Although I never doubted that you can hide so well from her.”

“I know you didn’t.” Rowida smiled, then kneeled and hugged the boy hard.

“I can’t breathe.” Ethan’s muffled giggles came from the depth of Rowida’s embrace.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to choke you.” Rowida pushed the boy away from her with a look of concern on her face.

Ethan laughed. “No, not at all, I liked it,” and he threw himself at Rowida and hugged her.

Rowida laughed for a moment, then pushed the boy away and said, “Tomorrow, we make you the spymaster, hiding where nobody will find you.”

“Yes.” Ethan punched the air while jumping. “I will be the best spymaster ever.”

By the end of her sixth day in Beimini, a woman came knocking on Rowida’s door ’.

She entered, and she was almost Rowida’s age, maybe two or three years older at most, making her in her early twenties.

“Mistress Rowida,” the woman said. “I have been sent from Miss Mariah to inform you that you will leave tomorrow.”

“I understand.” Rowida nodded resignedly.

“Here, these are the things found with you on the day of your capture, eighteen months ago.” The woman passed a tight bundle to Rowida, then she added, “They must never return to Agatha.”

Before Rowida could open the bundle, the woman said, “Tomorrow, we will empty the eastern quadrant of the town, where the portal is.” She looked at Rowida intently, then added, “Miss Mariah didn’t want this tragic event to affect the fragile status of pregnant women and children around the city.”

“So, I will leave alone, as I did for the last eighteen months.” A bitterness dripped from each word Rowida said, one which the messenger woman missed or ignored.

“You will have from the crack of dawn till dusk,” the woman said firmly. “If you don’t leave by dusk, Miss Mariah wanted me to remind you that there are always worse things than your current punishment.” Then the woman shivered a little.

“No need to throw threats,” Rowida scoffed. “I am keen on leaving your city more than you can imagine.”

The woman nodded and left the room.

Rowida opened the bundle in a hurry, and among her other belongings, was the staff of souls.

“They gave you back your staff, just as I predicted.” Violet appeared next to Rowida’s bed.

“And they will empty the whole area of the portal.” Rowida nodded. “Also, just as you predicted.”

“Yes, I have lived long enough to read the hearts of your people like simple alphabet parchments.”

Then she threw her head back and laughed for some minutes.

Right after dawn, Ethan sneaked out of the common rooms of the orphaned children and headed to the east part of the city, where there was a big gate guarded by two black marble lions.

He hid immediately behind the rightmost statue and crouched.

A smile grew mischievously on his small face. He was going to be the spymaster, and Rowida was doing everything she could to help him. Soon, she will be here to show him the ultimate hiding place, and he will be hidden where nobody can ever find him.

He giggled at the thought, but stopped his giggles fast, as he remembered he was to stay hidden till Rowida arrived.

Rowida had all her gear from before her capture set in front of her, already stacked and ready to be worn, or to be hidden around her body, to start the last preparation for her journey. She also had a pack of parchments, holding the legendary locations of other portals, as well as some believed to be long lost Arcanos, with rumored placement on the surface world.

She doubted if those maps were real, or even if they were real, were accurate, but they held clues to some elusive targets on her journey, worth pursuing.

She snorted. When she collected these maps, it was for a far future where she will lead armies to the surface to take hold of these Arcanos. She never imagined she would have only a small boy and an enigmatic spirit as her army. Yet, she never imagined she could be stripped of all her powers as well.

She hurried to dress up, Ethan should be where she told him to wait for her by now, and she wanted to move fast before his absence was noticed.

“Rowida,” Ethan whispered in a very loud voice. “Over here.”

She moved to where he squatted behind the statue and smiled. “You hid perfectly.”

He smiled back at her, brimming with pride.

“Now, we must go to the other place, before they find you.”

“Yes,” he whispered in the same loud voice, excitedly. “Let’s go.”

Rowida nodded and touched the gate for a second, knowing Mariah must have activated it before sealing this part in time for her departure, and immediately the entire gate glowed, then a vibrating shimmer went all over it.

Rowida offered her hand to Ethan with a smile, he took it, and they both stepped into the shimmering gate.

## Chapter 7 Losing your heart

Ethan confessed his feelings to Rowida the first day on the surface, he was terrified, complained of irrational fears from the harsh sun, the strange taste of food in this place, and the lack of people.

On the second day, he cried for hours, pleading with Rowida to take him back to Beimini, but she shook her head slowly and said, “I am sorry little brother.”

She knelt to hug him, he pushed her away and cried even more. She sighed and said, “We will go back, I promise, just not today, not even after a month.”

The next day, Ethan complained of severe pains in his stomach, so, Rowida, unsure what to do, carried him and ran where Violet said there would be a town of surface people nearby.

She ran with a moaning Ethan for almost an hour, until the fields of farms were distinctly noticeable among the forest growth, and eventually, she happened upon a group of huge men.

Rowida stopped all of a sudden as she saw the men coming towards her, the shortest of them stood almost two heads above her, they were not just taller and broader than the men in Agartha, but their skin had a strange color, almost white, with red spots around the nose and ears.

Ethan moaned as he clutched his stomach.

She looked desperately at the men and said, “Please, help my brother. He needs a healer.”

The men looked at her in confusion, then one of them started to talk, a slow, lilting language like she had never heard before.

She pushed Ethan in the man’s arms. “He needs a healer, your food poisoned him.”

The man looked at her anguished face, her pleading arms, and the way she pushed the boy into his arms and nodded.

He took Ethan from her and started to move with large strides to the east, so she followed him while the other men surrounded them, and every now and then, one of the men would eye her with wide eyes, shook his head and said something in their strange tongue.

The procession walked fast, and because of their immense bodies, Rowida, who was short for an Agarthan, almost ran alongside them to keep pace.

Finally, the procession reached a primitive-looking village, where there were shacks all around, and a large building with the sign of warding against evil on top.

The man carrying Ethan proceeded immediately to that building, and he pushed the door. A man all in black rushed to his aid.

Rowida was terrified, her fear transcended the void and flowed out of her in waves, for in Agartha, those men in black are the morticians who care for the dead.

The man in black turned from inspecting Ethan and addressed her. After several trials, she realized he must have used more than one tongue. One of them almost felt understandable, but not quite.

She started to cry silently, if she still had her Vrill, she could have understood them and passed some understanding onto them, she and them would have the common tongue offered by the Vrill, at least to the benefit of poor Ethan. But she had no Vrill, and she watched futilely as they discussed what to do with Ethan.

The man in black kept shaking his head as more and more men tried to talk to him, and eventually, he pointed them outside of the building.

The procession moved again, this time delving deeper into the village. As Rowida followed them, she started to realize this was more a town than a village, even if the architecture was primitive, no village in Agartha had this large number of houses.

Eventually, they reached a house almost at the end of the village.

The men hammered the door until a young man opened, who talked to the men fast, lots of nodding, then they took Ethan inside.

When Rowida tried to enter, a man shook his head and put his arm out to block her. She tried to push his arm, it was impossible, the man was the size of an Agarthan ox. She threw her whole body at him, screaming for Ethan and crying. Eventually, the young man came to the door and said something to the man outside, and she was allowed to enter.

*This one must be a healer*, she thought, as he had shelves of bottled and boxed mixtures, just like the tonics used by the purple healers in Agartha.

She ran to where Ethan was laid on a huge bed, the size of it matched those giants but made Ethan look like a toddler. He was sleeping, but his skin felt hot. Rowida turned to the healer and said, "Do you have bean extract? It is very good for his fever."

The healer stopped in his tracks and stared fiercely at her for a moment, then mumbled something and went back to his search through his shelves.

Finally, he grabbed a bottle, removed its cork, sniffed it, then took it to Ethan. He pushed the boy to lick a few drops, then pulled a chair and sat watching Ethan. After a minute or two, he signaled for Rowida to grab a chair as well, so she did.



After some hours, Ethan opened his eyes.

“Rowida, please come.” Ethan opened his small arms to her, and she rushed to hug him.

“I had a very bad dream.” Ethan swallowed and said in a trembling voice, “There were giants running with me, and you were chasing after them screaming my name.”

A tear fell down Rowida’s cheek. “It was not a dream, little brother.”

She hugged him close to her, and said, “I am sorry, so, so, sorry that I brought you here.”

“Don’t cry, Rowida,” he said softly over her shoulder. “I am better now.”

“We have to find beans here.” She stood, “They must have beans, they will fix your stomach and lower your fever.”

“Yes. I feel hungry.”

The healer of the surface village was observing them intently, then he went to the door and left.

Rowida stayed with Ethan for the next half of an hour, then the man who carried Ethan earlier came inside and started to grab Ethan.

“Where are you taking him?” She stood in front of the giant, challenging him to move the boy.

The man said something in his strange tongue, made signs to his mouth, and then put both hands parallel to his cocked head.

Rowida understood. They offered food and lodging, so she nodded to the man and allowed him to carry Ethan.

She followed the man for some time as he went continuously to the north. They went out of the town and headed to a farm, and in it was a huge house, which they entered.

Inside was an equally huge woman, and what Rowida assumed were children, because they looked so young and fresh, but some of them were even taller than her, only one who looked like a toddler was slightly shorter than her.

The man talked fast to the woman, who nodded, then she smiled at Rowida, and rushed somewhere deep in the house.

The man went inside one of the rooms and laid Ethan on an even bigger bed than in the healer’s house, then he covered the boy, and signaled for Rowida to follow.

She hesitated for a moment, then she went after him.

He led her to what might be a dining room, only everything was at least twice that of Agatha. He urged her to sit, and the woman brought her a plate of porridge, and it smelled enticing. But Rowida shook her head. “Ethan needs beans, we will only eat beans.” Then she pushed the plate away.

For the next evening, there were several trials to offer her food, which she refused, and she did the same when they offered food to Ethan, as she knew that only broad beans could help eliminate whatever toxin was in Ethan's system.

By the next morning, the family who hosted Ethan and Rowida had tried everything they could offer, but not until late in the evening, that they brought the beans.

Rowida started to eat immediately, and pulled some of the stalks, and ran to Ethan, feeding him as much as she could.

Two days after Rowida and Ethan were first hosted by the family, the man in black came to the house. He had a long discussion with the man who hosted them, and Rowida felt some hot topic from the man in black as he kept waving, making the warding against the evil sign and pointing to Rowida, who stood at the corner of the room. After that, the man in black left.

Later that day, Ethan left the room for the first time, but he could barely walk, and Rowida had to hold his hands until they reached the dining room.

Rowida was still not sure if the toxins left Ethan's body, because he looked very fragile and tired after even a small discussion, so, she insisted on the diet of beans for both of them. Yet Ethan smiled brightly at the children of the house, inviting with his smile to play a simple running game, even though they were twice his size and height.

Rowida wondered about the strange way children of two different cultures and tongues could share a game and communicate without words. And then she reasoned it might be because their aura was not settled yet that they might be able to draw on some rudiments of a green aura inside them, to pass understanding.

By the end of their first week, the lady of the house brought a white dress for Rowida and a matching white tunic for Ethan. Then the family took them to the building with the warding against evil sign on its top, and they entered.

It looked like the entire village was inside, and at the far wall, the man in black had a basin of water in front of him. Family after family would bring a child, and the man in black would dip them in the basin, made the warding sign on them so many times, sang songs, and passed them back to their parents.

Rowida figured it was a cultural event, and since the family accepted them, they meant for her and Ethan to bathe in that basin, maybe like the blood kinship ritual back at Agarthia.

"I am scared, Rowida." Ethan held tight to her.

"Don't worry, little brother." She assured him through a gentle pat to the head. "I think we will be accepted to the village through this ritual, nothing to fear."

When it was time for Rowida to dip in the basin, she climbed into it silently, and then Ethan followed, to much cheer and clapping from the townspeople.

Two days after the ritual, Rowida walked around town with Ethan, and as they walked, she said, “Either these people are all very rich, or iron is very easy to find here.”

She pointed to Ethan that almost everybody carried a weapon made from iron, even the lowest of people had the occasional knife strapped to their belt.

“All I can say is that their color is funny.” Ethan giggled. “Even though they have this harsh and hard sun.”

“And their height, they are huge.” Rowida laughed along. “We both look like children to them.”

“But you are old.” Ethan shook his head. “You must be a hundred or something, I am only six.”

“I am not a hundred years old.” She stopped and looked at him with big wide eyes. “I am only nineteen.”

“Still too old, you’re ancient,” Ethan said it and ran ahead, giggling.

After a few meters of running, he stopped and clutched at his chest. He was panting hard. “I don’t feel well, Rowida,” he said this and fainted in her arms.

Two more weeks passed, and Rowida started to catch essential words like food, drink, sleep. She even caught the name of the place they were in, Woolpit, as everybody was referring to this place as this. She also fitted very well with the family. But Ethan was not getting any better, and to make things worse, for those three weeks, Violet didn’t reach out to her, not even once. In fact, Ethan was weaker and feebler each passing day, and Rowida didn’t know why this was happening, but she was not sure it was any poison in his system.

She tried to urge the family to take Ethan to the healer again, but she just couldn’t communicate it through.

Days passed, and her attempts were not successful, especially as the family treated her as just another child, must have been because of her delicate frame and short stature, and adults didn’t pay that much attention to the pleas of children.

Until it was the sixth day of the fourth week.

Ethan was in a very bad state, and finally, the family called in the healer. The man inspected Ethan, listened to his heart, and poked around his mouth for some time. Then he stood and shook his head. Rowida saw the lady of the house cry **softly**, and the man of the house nodding heavily to whatever the healer said.

She didn’t need to know the tongue to understand what the healer said, Ethan was dying. She ran to his side, touched his face **softly**, and Ethan opened his eyes with difficulty and gave her a

wane smile. He couldn't even talk, he just reached for her hand with his and held to her as he searched her eyes, a sad smile was all he could give.

Tears ran freely from Rowida's eyes, and she held tight to his small hand. She stood beside him, holding his hand long after the healer left, long after the family went to their beds with heavy steps, long after night had come and was almost gone.

Her tears dried, not because of the void, but because her eyes were swollen shut from so many hours of crying.

"Rowida." Violet's voice came as a soft whisper. "He will not see the sun of this day."

"Why?" Rowida whispered raggedly. "Can't you do something to help him?"

"I can play with fate." Violet's whisper came from far to Rowida's left. "But, I can't challenge her outright in her domain."

"He is going to die." Rowida turned savagely. "And you knew this, you knew this was his fate."

"I did," Violet whispered. "So that you can have someone to draw on, he is a green like you."

"No," Rowida raised her voice, then she lowered it again in fear of waking up the family. "I will not use the staff on him."

"But you must, he will die anyway." Violet's voice seemed to grow slightly stronger.

"Not by my hand." Rowida shook her head violently, and her tear-soaked collar, spread some of the salty drops to the floor, an ode to finality.

"It will happen whether you do it or not, don't let his short life go to waste." Violet was almost material by then.

"But he is my little brother, I can't do this to him." Rowida cried with dry eyes, as her body shook with each breath.

"You have an hour to decide, then he will be gone." Violet's voice grew faint again, then faded to nothing.

Most of the hour passed, as Rowida still held to Ethan's hand, which was very cold, and even though she tried to warm it by rubbing it, it didn't warm to any of her attempts.

She finally shook him, trying to get him to wake up, but he just moved under her hands like a ragged doll.

She kissed his forehead and stood. She headed to their bundle and pulled the staff. Kneeling beside Ethan's dormant body, she rocked from violent shaking to her entire body, anguish squeezing her dry.

Rowida placed one end of the staff to his forehead, and the other to hers and whimpered as the warmth of his soul entered her body.

But the glow didn't reach to turn green, the staff just became inert.

She looked puzzled at the staff, and then at Ethan.

She put her hand to his nose, and no air came from it, none at all.

Rowida let the staff fall, hugged Ethan's body, and wailed.

## Chapter 8 The Deal

“I don’t care.” Rowida stood in front of the ancient altar in the woods, as the falling rain drenched her from head to toe. “I will banish you. I hate every minute I spent with you.”

“All this would accomplish is making me very angry,” Violet said with a snarl.

“Do your worst. ” “Eight years in this desolate place, you even forced me to get married to that idiot son of the royal officer.”

“His beloved Agnes is an evil warmonger.” Violet laughed long. “But he will serve his purpose, and soon.”

“I don’t care,” Rowida screamed against the howling wind. “I will get pregnant with his child and leave this hell, and go back to Agartha.”

“You don’t even know where are any of the portals.” Violet laughed even harder. “What would you do? Search till the end of your days?”

“As I found this Arcanos.” Rowida pointed to the altar. “I will find another to guide me back.”

“You wouldn’t even survive my banishment.” Violet exploded in laughter. “The magical energy released would vaporize your body.”

“As I said.” Rowida smiled a vicious smile, made more so as it was framed by nearing lightening. “Death is a far better alternative than living with you, hanging to me like a leach.”

“Then you really wish to end the Deal?” Violet stopped laughing all of a sudden.

“Yes, with every beat of my heart, and from my innermost core, yes.” Rowida stared at Violet, who flew high into the storm.

“This Arcanos would not help you then. You have to fulfill the contract.”

As the lightening finally reached them, Rowida pushed a metal rod at the altar and stood back.

Not a moment passed, and the lightning hit the rod, bathing the whole area in bright light.

The altar now glowed a deep yellow, and Rowida ran and threw herself on it before Violet could interfere.

Then, she was not here.

Rowida stood on what looked like a long road hanging over nothing, going towards nothing and coming from nothing.

She started to walk slowly at first, then picked up her pace and soon was jogging down the road. After what seemed like hours of jogging, Rowida saw ahead what appeared to be a city in the void, and the road led directly towards it. She continued walking until she reached the gates.

A booming voice coming from nowhere said, "Who dares enter the city of Arcadia?"

"Rowida Verdum," she said in a firm voice. "I made a deal under duress, and I would like to nullify it."

"Who did you make a deal with?" The booming voice seemed to vibrate all the bones in Rowida's body.

"Violet."

Rowida knew lore described this place, but it was too material, nothing like she imagined it to be at all. She even smiled as she remembered her childish recreation of the realm of the Others, filled with wonders and oddities as far as the eye could see, nothing like the rather ordinary-looking castle in front of her, not at all.

In an instant, Violet appeared next to her, but this time she was as solid as Rowida was, with a flesh and blood body, not an ethereal one.

The voice boomed again. "Violet, also known as Morgan Le Fey, what say you to the claims of this woman?"

"I say that they are all false," Violet said in a sure voice.

"Then the council of the Others would have to judge these claims." The voice rumbled for some time after it finished its words, and the gate of the city opened.

As Rowida took a single step inside the gate, she found herself standing in front of twelve huge chairs, set in a semi-circle facing her.

"Prove your claim, human." A man with a short black beard addressed her.

"Please, brothers and sisters, match the size of the human, lest she thinks that we are condescending to her," Violet said.

In the time it took an eye to blink, the twelve people with their twelve chairs were now of regular size in front of Rowida.

"We are waiting for your proof, human," the man with the black beard said.

Rowida adjusted the way she stood and said, "Violet came to me as I was in waiting for being banished from the city of Beimini." She swallowed as the memories came flooding back. "She knew every move the Keeper of the nursery would take, including her offer to help me come back to Beimini through pregnancy."

“Yet she omitted all that and used my lack of a soul to coerce me in signing the contract.” Rowida waved her hand in anger. “And then she made me kidnap a small boy, leading him to his death.”

Rowida shook her head to the sad memory of losing Ethan. “She forced me to seduce the son of a man of power, and marry him, and for eight years, her moves led me nowhere in search of a soul.”

“I see.” The man turned to Violet and said, “Can you refute her claims?”

“Of course.” Violet produced the contract from somewhere around her attire.

“For her first claim, I didn’t force her or coerce her, as seen in the recording of our discussion before the signing.” She handed the man the contract, which he passed fast among the other members, then returned it to Violet.

“While we were under the power of the Deal, I could sense her wishes and desires, and I just helped her fulfill them.” Violet hid the contract gain about her, then said, “She wanted to keep the boy because his presence filled the void of her soul with warmth and feelings, I didn’t force her to take him to the surface where he died, she did it with her own violation.”

“As for her search for a soul, you can examine her, and you will find that she does have one-fifth of a soul, while as in the contract, she started with only one-twentieth of a soul.” Violet pointed to Rowida.

The man moved from his chair, touched Rowida’s forehead, then went back to his chair. “Continue, Violet.”

“The only path left to her was to give birth to a green child and take his soul to complete hers, as agreed in the contract, thus the marriage.” Violet finished and stood still with her arms straight beside her.

The twelve whispered for a while, then the man said, “You have not broken the rules of the Deal, Violet.” He paused for a moment then added, “However, she is important, and so was her balance, and you risked tipping the scale. In the light of this contract and both your testimonies, a decision had been reached.”

“This council has deemed the contract finalized, you can take your one-tenth of her soul and end it.”

“As you see fit, great Malachi.”

Rowida stood again in the storm, and she realized only a moment had passed since the lightning struck the altar as the afterglow was still there, but the altar was inert, as it didn’t glow anymore.



Beside her materialized Violet, and she had a wild snarl on her face. “You fool,” she spat the words. “I don’t care for the lousy one-tenth, I wanted to give you your full potential.”

“Just do it and let’s be over with this,” Rowida shouted at Violet, challenging her to finalize the contract.

“I will take it,” Violet rumbled. “Although it was just an excuse to make the Deal.”

She shook her head, and the storm stopped. “I could have made you immortal, but you settled for some lines in mundane history books.”

Then she descended like a hawk towards Rowida, latched on her head, and sucked.

Rowida felt the same agonizing pain of having her soul pulled out of her body as she had all those years ago.

As Rowida fell to the wet, muddy ground, Violet approached her and said, “Here is my final gift to you, ungrateful fool.”

Her form started to mist over. “Ask your husband to take you to the state of Walachia, there you will find the lost dragon soul, and the Arcanos bound to it, it will prove formidable in the wars to come.”

Then she disappeared.

Rowida sat laughing maniacally in the mud.

## Chapter 9 Out of the darkness

“Agnes, I grew tired of this place.” A young man addressed Rowida as he laid on a four-poster bed languidly. “Let’s go back to England.”

“But I still want to stay another week, I love the mountain air, Richard.” Rowida jumped next to him and kissed him.

“England has mountains, plenty of mountains.” Richard looked wide-eyed at Rowida’s reclining form.

“Well, they are not as high as it is in here, it is good for my constitution, and for our future baby,” Rowida purred next to his ear.

“You always have the best arguments.” He sighed. “Fine, one last week in this place, then we are off towards home.”

“Of course, darling.” She nibbled at his neck for a moment then jumped out of bed.

“Richard, I will go for a walk, you rest till I return.” She ran to the door. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” He waved desperately after her.

It had been three years since Rowida managed to break her Deal with Violet, three years of having to suffer her foolish husband and his urges. The worst part was, her all good, yet very slanderous husband couldn’t sire children, not that he lacked the aptitude to try, he was a well-known figure in every brothel and house of ill repute across Europe.

Rowida didn’t know whether this was Violet’s last revenge on her, or was it a grand mistake of her late magical leach, what this led to, was that she chased after Arcanos all across the continent. And she did find her share, but the worthiest of them came only five months ago, the seeker’s arrowhead, an Arcanos that could find other Arcanos, and anything of enough magical potential.

This was when she decided to test the last advice Violet gave her, to seek the lost dragon and bind it to her will.

She managed to convince her husband to come to Walachia, and for the last two months, the seeker's arrow was leading her all over the place. She found four more Arcanos, which was not bad, she reasoned there must be a portal nearby if she could find this many Arcanos in such a limited area.

The night before, the arrowhead pointed her to the base of a mountain, but it was late, and she didn't want to lose her husband's financial support until she was ready to leave the surface and all its wretchedness.

Today she headed to the base of the mountain. She must find something worthwhile, at least something to allow her to continue her journey of retaliation against all who did her wrong.

She walked swiftly towards the mountain base, sure-footed as any surface dweller.

She smiled. During those eleven years, she grew taller and wider, seemed the food and sun of this place allowed her to utilize her body better, even though back in Agarthia, she stopped growing like most girls, at the age of fifteen. She still was short for most women here but was considered normal short, nothing like her old stature when she first arrived in Woolpit, as she learned over time, they thought of her then to be a maximum ten years of age child, or maybe even eight.

Mariah's gift also helped her immensely. At thirty years of age, she looked more like she was nineteen than her actual age.

She woke from her contemplations as she reached the base of the mountain, and something was definitely there. A corner of one of the rocks gave a familiar shimmering glow. She touched the rock, and suddenly, a cave opened in front of her.

Slowly, Rowida ventured inside, using one of the Arcanos she found last year, on her eyes. It gave her true sight, darkness, and illusions would not stand in the lens-shaped Arcanos's way.

The walls were lined by veins of gold and copper, two minerals which lent dragons protection against spiritual attacks, she was in the right place.

"Stop," a voice bounced in her head. "Don't come any nearer."

"I come in peace," Rowida said in her native tongue as she licked her lips to soften their dryness. "I mean you no harm, majestic one."

"Ah, an Agarthan." The owner of the voice laughed. "A long way from home, or are you lost like me?"

"Banished, in fact." Rowida took a small step deeper into the cave.

"You must have been very wicked to deserve that."

Something big moved in the distance, slithering over the cave floor, or was it the roof?

"Yes, I was." Rowida took another tentative step. "But I have changed, a six-year-old boy changed me."

“No, you have not.” The voice laughed, and the slithering sound came nearer. “You need to have a soul to mend, and you almost have none.”

Rowida stopped. “Then help me have a soul, to make amends.”

She bowed and sighed.

In another second, the hot belly of the dragon was almost touching her head.

“Give me some of your blood, to help me decide.” The dragon’s voice resonated in Rowida’s head to the rhythmic breathing of the huge belly above her.

Rowida drew a small knife from her belt, punctured her thumb with it, and raised her hand above her head.

The belly retreated, and something hot and wet engulfed her hand for a moment then released it. Rowida smiled in relief when the dragon’s tongue left her hand.

“You were a green,” the voice said. “And a consort to one of the Others.” the voice laughed. “And a tool of destiny all along.”

Rowida knew from extensive studies of the lore of Agartha dragons were not just magical creatures, they were nature’s spirits, the manifestation of nature’s magical powers over all her domain, as such, even though they had massive, majestic, and terrible bodies, they didn’t need them to exist.

What she was asking the dragon was to let its spirit inhabit her body for a time, a replacement of her lost soul, until she can get a new one. According to lore, this had been done only once before, Malachi the terrible did it. This was as far as Rowida knew of dragons inhabiting human bodies. And if she was really fated for great things, the dragon would comply, as lore dictated dragons always wanted to be in the middle of life-changing events, or that they also were vehicles of fate and destiny.

“You ask a lot, green child.” The dragon laughed, and the entire cave rumbled and shook to its mirth, dust, and small rubble fell over Rowida from all directions.

“I know, but if I am really as you say, destiny’s tool.” Rowida moved from her bowing posture to stand straight, looking directly at the head of the dragon hidden in the darkness at the top of the cave. “Then, I am just asking enough.”

“You are, and this is the interesting thing.” The dragon’s head suddenly went down from the roof of the cave to a few inches away from Rowida’s face. “I have been waiting for you for millennia, Rowida, the soulless.”

Rowida trembled with anticipation, but she also knew she had to give something to the dragon in exchange for having its immense power, and it was almost always something that mattered only to the supplicant for dragon power.

“I will join your soulless body, Rowida,” the dragon breathed down on Rowida’s head. “In exchange for your heart, and from this point, you will cease to be Rowida the soulless, and become Rowida the heartless.”

“I accept, let it be done.” Rowida opened her arms wide.

“This might burn you, a lot.” The dragon chuckled as it breathed fire at Rowida, engulfing her whole.

*The world didn’t change much since I went to sleep in my cave,* the dragon’s voice played in Rowida’s mind.

*But it did, majestically, humans have taken over everything.* Rowida thought this, even though she didn’t want to, all her thoughts were accessible to the dragon, and the dragon’s to her.

*Interesting, humans have splintered so far,* the dragon’s thought floated in Rowida’s mind. *Now, Rowida, the heartless, what is next?*

*We find an entrance to Agartha and wage war.* Rowida turned to walk away from the cave.

*Always wanted to see another war,* the dragon’s thought ran in circles. *The best in people show only in the fire of war.*

## PART 2 - WAR IN AGARTHA



## Chapter 1 At the gates of Zarzura

“Last report from the front, Lord Charles.” A man in white chainmail and helmet handed a sheaf of parchments to Charles, who was sitting behind a desk cluttered with parchments, maps, and books.

“Thank you, Robert.” Charles took the report, nodded to the man dismissing him, and went back to his reading.

The dragon lady as she called herself, or the green lady as most other people called her, just finished her tenth attack to the gates of Zarzura, after the stagnant siege she laid on the city for the last six months. And she was pushed back as usual, yet something about her doggedness was worrying him.

He had been elected as lord ruler above the council for less than six months when she first came with her strange army. Residents of the farmlands around the city, were the first to report her, as most escaped their residence and took refuge in the city upon seeing the advancing monsters and magical beasts coming their way.

The dragon lady sat on the back of a flying wyvern as she first came to the gates of the city, and from her high perch, she delivered one demand, “Give me a single green aura man or woman, sacrifice them for the safety of your city, and I shall leave you to your lives, unharmed. You have one day to comply.”

That first day, normal people ran to the parapets and threw rocks at her and her army.

She didn’t even give them a second glance. For a whole day, she stood at the gates, and by the hour, her army grew, until, by the dawn of the second day, the entire mass of farmland around the city was occupied by the magical beasts, as if every single magical creature in the whole of Agartha came to their doorstep.

Then the first attack came, behemoths threw themselves at the wall, one after another, attacked the west wall for hours until night came, and then they just stopped, and fell back in their ranks.

The architects of the city spent that night fortifying the west wall and assessing the damage to the structure, the wall held, and the magic barrier was activated.

Then on the next day, droves of wyvern came at the city from heavens, dropping huge rocks that were barely deflected by the magic barrier.

The third day of the attack had griffins doing the same thing only with smaller rocks.

The fourth day, harpies came with even smaller rocks.

The fifth day, phoenixes came with the smallest of rocks, and those passed through the barrier, showering the guards and the inhabitants of the city with rock hail. On that night, one captain devised a contraption to be placed on the heads of the guards and soldiers who were called to action, extra protection from heavenly attacks.

On the sixth day, the guards discovered diggers under the city, tunneling under the gates. The entire day was spent in pouring pitch and tar around the wall from the inside, then imbuing it with magical combustants, which caused them to ignite on contact with any underground intruder. The three purple mages retained in the city's army were exhausted by the end of the day, they had to sleep for the next two days.

On the seventh day, the dragon lady sent a contingent of howlers at the walls, the whole city's population had to plug their ears with cotton and wax, some of the more fragile of the populace had to have their heads wrapped in wet linen to counter the auditory pain. Then the dragon lady repeated her demands on the eighth day, then the cycle repeated, only with different creatures, for another week.

By the end of the fifth month, she declared a non-offensive siege, saying that she would give the city time to consider her demands.

For the next six months, the dragon lady sieged the city with new attacks, till two months ago, when she started to make massive attacks once a week. This was the eighth month since the siege began, making it a total of thirteen months since the dragon lady first attacked the city and two months since she started to weekly hammer the defenses of the city again.

Charles rubbed his eyes to ease their tiredness, he had to read and authorize tens of parchments daily. Reports of the city's food and drink stocks had to be realized and accounted for, as well as stocks of weaponry for the army added to those, the letters sent to the other nations asking for their help, which were all returned with regrets, and demands for more time to debate the issue.

Nobody ever had to contend with fighting an entire army of monsters before, no army leader ever considered it to formulate a strategy of how to defeat such an army, and no council of any of the cities was willing to take the risk of destroying their armies in pitting them against unbeatable opponents to test new strategies.

Charles sighed, after the last attack, some of the council members started to debate the dragon lady's demand, pushing the old argument for the welfare of one against the welfare of the entire nation. Charles had to tell them that the one had to be picked at random, it could be a spouse, a loved one, or a friend, and if they were willing to cast a vote, he would still oppose it.

He was also very angry of late. He tried to pass a motion to the council for going on the offense instead of just hiding behind the gates of the city, it was refused, and the reason was, as councilwoman Clara said, "We have the resources to sustain ten more years of siege, our orchards, and gardens are providing enough food to replenish whatever is consumed, and our metal workers



are producing new weapons each day, why should we risk opening our gates and lowering the magic barrier for an uncalculated risk?"

This argument was not just mounted by councilwoman Clara, but by almost every member of the council of Zarzura, and Charles couldn't deny the logic behind it. But of late, he started to get reports from the purples to be on the watch for a new order rising among the ranks of the reds, a group of zealots who called themselves the Order of Purification.

Charles knew how fanatical the reds could be about the whole pure colored auras, and he knew of their disdain of the secondary or mixed colored auras like his nation's, the oranges, and the purples. What worried him the most was the possibility this new racist order would grow enough in power to join forces with the dragon lady, then nobody could calculate the outcome of such an assault on the city.

He was going through his twentieth report when a woman came in with a tray of food, *it must be lunchtime*.

"Thank you, Martha, for bringing me lunch." He kissed the woman's hand.

"Actually, it is dinner time, my love." She sighed and kissed his forehead. "Eat and come home as hastily as possible."

Charles looked at her with wide eyes, and his mouth was agape for a moment before he shook his head and said, "Yes, my love, I will finish these reports and come soon."

She caressed his head tenderly, then kissed him and left the room.

Charles didn't eat till the food congealed, but he was at least content the reports were ready to be distributed on all the parts of the city, which ran the siege, and tomorrow would be a new day.

## Chapter 2 Gertrude

When Rowida first arrived in Agartha from the surface, she was scorched from forcing a passage through one of the portals. Dragon spirit could enter at will, but her body was not recognized by the magic of the portal, thus, when she passed, her body caught fire, magical fire.

Even though she had the water of Beimini, and the magical powers of the dragon spirit, Rowida wouldn't heal fully for two years.

During these two years, she sought residence in the same cave where she entered Agartha, a portal the dragon led her to, near where she met the dragon in Walachia, and where she ended was in Drake Mountain, north of Zarzura.

Most Agarthans avoided Drake mountain and the areas surrounding it, as legends said it was the breeding grounds of the dragons, and nobody cared to suffer the wrath of an expectant mother dragon. Hence the place was the perfect hiding spot for Rowida to regain her power and strength. But after the two years it took her to heal, Rowida was reluctant to venture far, and for some time, she couldn't think of a plan to exact her revenge, or even to lure a green to take their spirit.

Although she considered raiding trade carts, as quite a few were greens, the dragon spirit didn't condone theft or murder without a decent enough cause, and as dragon logic dictated, the killing should be only in retaliation, and raiding traders completely negated this.

Time passed, and Rowida settled to the life of a hermit. She even used the water from Beimini sparingly, helping her to pass the years, with little change.

The dragon spirit, being an almost immortal creature, didn't have a concept of time and its passage, so it didn't mind staying in the cave for the next millennium if this was what it took Rowida to move on. So, for twenty years since her descent, Rowida stayed, hiding in the cave, unable to come up with any way to deal her blow to the greens. Twenty years of losing interest in the affairs of humans, affected by the dragon spirit to degrees of complete molding into one being.

She didn't even realize twenty years have passed, she didn't even care to count the days, and she didn't even miss the company of other humans, just basking in the vast knowledge of the dragon in her head, was enough to entertain her for days, weeks, and even months, driving one idea or bit of knowledge at a time.

She was getting a feeling for nature through the dragon, so she kept a very low existence to safe keep the nature of the area around Drake mountain. In fact, for those twenty years, nobody even knew she was there or that she existed.

One autumn's day, she went out of the cave and passed by the nearby river to fill her water canteens, a chore she did every week, never missed, and never any less monotonous. As she leaned by the river bank, a shadow passed over her back, and a glimpse of a reflection appeared on the water's surface. Rowida turned and stood fast, pulling her knife from her belt in the process.

"Who goes there?" The words were almost difficult to pronounce, and even to her ear, they sounded more like grunts than words.

For a few moments, only silence answered Rowida's call, but then a girl, of around fourteen years of age, came from within the bushes.

"I am sorry, I didn't mean to disturb." The girl fidgeted and stumbled as she answered the challenge Rowida threw to the world.

"Why are you here?" Rowida snarled.

"Curiosity, and a lot of foolishness." The girl was about to cry. "I wanted to see Drake mountain up close."

"Where are you from, girl?" Rowida's tone softened a bit. "And what do people call you?"

"I am from Akakor. I mean, I have to go to Akakor, eventually." The girl still fidgeted. "And my name is Gertrude."

"Isn't that too far from here, red girl?" Rowida lowered her knife but was still alert.

"It is." Gertrude nodded. "But I just graduated Nafoura, and before I went to the city of the reds, I wanted to explore the world a bit."

"I see." Rowida turned back to filling her water vessels.

"I didn't know anybody lived out here." Gertrude got closer to where Rowida crouched.

"Don't come any closer, I am fast with my knife," Rowida warned the girl from her crouched position.

"Sorry," said Gertrude as she jumped back.

Rowida finished filling the vessels and stood, she gathered them in a loop of rope, straddled them on her back and started walking.

"Do you live nearby?" Gertrude followed her, skipping the twigs and brambles which Rowida just waded through.

Rowida kept walking, ignoring the girl as if she didn't exist.

"I am sorry to have intruded." Gertrude jumped another obstacle. "But would you care to share some food with me, I was hoping for some company."

Rowida increased her pace to a jog.

“You are so strong, even if you don’t have an aura.” Gertrude matched Rowida’s strides as she talked.

Rowida stopped. “What exactly do you see in my aura?”

“There is nothing there to see, just wafts of black.” Gertrude squinted at Rowida. “Also, you have something strange about you, something I can’t place.”

*This girl is also a tool for destiny like you.* The thoughts of the dragons flowed through Rowida’s head.

*She is so talkative,* Rowida thought.

*But she might prove useful, invite her to the cave.* The dragon’s thoughts felt of amusement.

“Care to share some food, Gertrude?” Rowida tried a smile, and all she managed was a grimace.

Gertrude smiled a big smile. “Sure, here or in your cave?”

Then looked embarrassed, and said, “I know you live in Drake mountain, I have been here for some days, no dragons though.”

“I know how to do this,” Gertrude said excitedly. “You said you can speak dragon, so you should have mastery over all the magical creatures of the land.”

*The girl has a point,* the dragon’s thought seemed to carry interest.

*She has been here for three days, and already you are showing favoritism,* Rowida thought back.

*Not at all.* The mirth filled the thoughts of the dragon. *But you needed a plan, and she just supplied one.*

“Okay, how can we go about this, Gertrude?” Rowida was getting better at smiling, she didn’t even gnash her teeth doing it.

“I think we have enough magical beasts to raze a city, my lady.” Gertrude stood beside Rowida as she petted one of the wyverns who joined her army only recently.

“Ten years to amass this army.” Rowida laughed a throaty laugh. “And still, I fear it is not quite ready.”

“But it is my lady,” Gertrude insisted. “We have every wyvern in Agarthia, all the behemoths, and almost all of the magical flying creatures, what else could we need?”

“A dragon.” Rowida turned from petting the wyvern to smile at Gertrude. “Just one to show them who I really am.”

*None will go to war, even I would not in my physical form.* The dragon’s thoughts carried a tinge of disdain. *Just accept your army as it is, Rowida.*

*Are you certain?* Rowida sent a probe to the dragon’s mind.

*Quite certain,* the dragon’s thoughts almost felt like a rumble.

Rowida sighed. “We march in the morning.”

### Chapter 3 The Order of Purification

Rowida ate in the silence of her tent, as nobody was around but Gertrude to feed, the rest of the army just fed itself whenever needed.

This was becoming a nuisance, as game animals started to be sparse around the siege area, and the dragon inside her head never settled for a diet of fruits and nuts.

She finished her food and stood, then she walked to the strategic map spread over a huge board held by two stands in the middle of the tent.

She knelt on the map, deciding on which part she should attack next, and which magical creatures should she use, and in which order.

Just as she was moving the pieces, Gertrude barged in, “My lady, a messenger awaits outside the perimeter of the siege.”

“What do they want?” Rowida put down the griffin figurine she held.

“An alliance, he claims he can give us ten thousand men.”

An hour before this, Gertrude circled the camp, trying to find any game, but as usual, it was almost impossible to find any recently as the magical beast never let a pray around their camp go unscathed.

She ventured further from the camp into the forest, as she was not willing to face Rowida’s wrath over the lack of meat in her diet. Half an hour passed, and her search was proving fruitless, and as she decided to go back to camp, a man suddenly dropped from the tree next to her. She pulled her two side knives and turned on him. The man twisted, jumped, and put the tree between him and her, then he said, “Wait, I bear good news to the leader of your army.”

“Who are you? And why did you try to take me down?” Gertrude advanced on him as she talked.

“I am not even armed.” The man shrugged. “How am I supposed to take you down?”

Gertrude squinted, then she said, “You are a red.” She scoffed. “And if you can shapeshift, you don’t need weapons.”

“True.” He nodded. “But then, I am the one trying to avoid contact, and you are the one advancing on me.”

She stopped advancing, but she didn’t lower her knives yet. “Who are you? And what news you wanted to pass to the Dragon Lady?”

“My name is Robin, and I am a messenger for his highness, the Grand Wizard, leader of the Order of Purification.”

Robert stood straight-backed, his head directed at some point in the heavens above them, and a strange glow lit his eyes as he spoke.

“And what does the Order of Purification want from us?” Gertrude lowered the knives halfway to her thighs.

“The Grand Wizard seeks a meeting with your leader to offer an alliance.” He gave a wide sincere smile.

Robin kneeled in front of Rowida. “Whatever you wish my Lady. Just tell me when you want the Grand Wizard to come, and I will pass your demands to him.”

“Good.” Rowida nodded and turned to the map. “I will await his arrival tomorrow at dusk after we finish the campaign of the day.” She turned to him and said, “You may go.”

Robert stood, beat his chest with his left hand, and left the tent.

“You will be my liaison with the Order, Gertrude.” Rowida turned to face Gertrude. “I don’t want to be distracted from my plan, and if the offer is good enough, then I will have to be involved.”

“Yes, my Lady.” Gertrude hesitated. “But shouldn’t you meet that Grand Wizard as agreed?”

“I will,” Rowida pulled on her chin as she spoke. “But after the usual cordiality, you will handle them.”

*Good, I would like to meet this Grand Wizard.* The dragon’s thought bubbled to the surface of Rowida’s mind.

*I knew you would,* Rowida’s thought flowed through. *And you can decide if he is as important as Gertrude or he is just a transient figure in the turnings of life.*

“Very wise decision, my Lady,” Gertrude curtsied and left the tent.

“It’s an honor to finally lay my eyes on your Grace.” The man stood a head taller than his men, and he filled his grey armor with great poise and elegance.

Rowida thought that every word he said was calculated, every move planned and anticipated, he could have been the perfect assassin or courtier in another life, maybe both.

“It is a delight, your eminence,” Rowida spoke as she played with her glass of wine. “Although I wonder at your title, Grand Wizard, you are not a purple, in fact, my second, Gertrude, told me that you have the strangest of auras.” Rowida turned to Gertrude. “Silver-grey, was it not?”

Gertrude bowed. “Indeed, my Lady.”

The Grand Wizard threw his head back and laughed a deep rich laugh. “I have been informed by my men that my aura is indeed unique.” His eyes seemed to delve into Rowida’s core, searching and finding answers she didn’t allow to be given.

She was alerted, and for the first time in ages, felt uncomfortable under his ’ gaze.

“They say it was mentioned in a prophecy, a very old one,” he said softly.

*He is indeed important, the dragon’s thoughts were filled with excitement. Though he is not a tool of destiny, he is a shaper of destiny.*

“Indeed.” Rowida started to search the man’s features, the enigmatic self-proclaimed Grand Wizard who sat in front of her.

He looked familiar, somehow. His piercing black eyes, his straight generous nose, and his perfectly shaped lips reminded her of a drawing she saw somewhere, maybe in a dream.

“I have been informed that your second would act as a liaison in our joined effort?” he said this, more of a question than a statement.

“Yes, for everyday matters.” Rowida adjusted the way she sat, she didn’t want to face those eyes for long, so she was now looking at him sideways. “But I will be the one dealing with your eminence directly in matters of general strategy and greater campaigns.”

He nodded as he gave her a wide smile. “This suits me.”

He leaned across the table. “My lady is very wise for her young age.”

He gave her a hungry look, which seemed to scan her entirety in the blink of an eye.

Rowida threw her head back and guffawed with laughter. “My looks might be deceiving your eminence.”

She felt satisfied with the puzzled expression drawn on his face.



“I think I would like to know your Grace, more intimately,” he said this and leaned back, leaving Rowida to feel the rush of hot blood to her cheeks.

“I have good news from the political front,” Gertrude said as she entered Rowida’s tent. “Not only did the reds declare their allegiance to the Order, but the yellows and blues are considering it.”

*The ruler of blues is bonded to one of us, like you and I.* The dragon’s thoughts came with a hint of puzzlement. *It is strange that they should follow the Order.*

*Maybe they see a benefit for their people.* Rowida’s thoughts bounced back. *Maybe it is something temporary like ours.*

*You are in for the charms of the Grand Wizard.* The dragon thoughts were mirthful.

*Well, I am just a woman, and it might be the second time that my heart had moved.* Rowida tried to counter the wave of mirth with one of logic.

*Lie as much as you want, Rowida, the heartless.* The wave of mirth just doubled.

“Good news Gertrude, but nothing to affect our position here at Zarzura.”

Rowida looked at the map for a moment, then smashed her hand on it, causing men and beast figurines to fly off the table’s edge.

“I believe that the stalemate would be resolved in our favor soon, my lady.” Gertrude bowed and backed out of the tent in a hurry.

## Chapter 4 Zarzura, the white city

“People of Zarzura.” Rowida stood next to the Grand Wizard beneath the walls of the white city. “This is my final warning.” She looked at the Grand Wizard as if for confirmation. “You have one week to bring me a green man or a green woman, a willing sacrifice on behalf of the whole city.” “If you want the green aura nation to be spared the wrath of the Grand Wizard and me, you will do as I demanded.”

She again looked at the Grand Wizard. “For by the end of the week, we shall unleash the most powerful Arcanos in existence, The Peace Granter, and every soul in your city will perish.”

She pushed her arm high for all to see something that seemed to cast shadows without light, on her and on the man standing beside her. “Heed my warning well, Zarzura.”

Then she walked back with fast steps to her tent, soon to be followed by the Grand Wizard.

“I hope we don’t have to do this.” She turned to face him. “I don’t want to be the killer of thousands of souls to prove a point.”

“It is against human nature.” the Grand Wizard pulled a chair and sat. “One of them will do it, it has to happen, and if nobody does it, we smuggle out a green man or woman and then use the Arcanos.”

“I really hope it doesn’t get to that.” She rubbed her eyes and then dropped her hand limply at her side. “It would be a terrible waste.”

“Because they were your people?” He asked her with a bemused expression on his face.

“No, it has nothing to do with that.” She sighed. “It will cause a great imbalance in the forces of this world, and permanently affect nature.”

“I am sorry, my love.” He shrugged. “But when you walk the path of war, you have to accept to do just that.”

“Acceptance is different from actually doing it.” She sat hard, facing him.

“Acceptance is the first step in doing a thing.” He waved a hand in the air. “The rest is just a path that has to be walked to connect the beginning to the end.”

“I understand that.” She grabbed the decanter from the center of the table and poured each of them a glass of chilled wine. “But the road from acceptance to the deed should be longer, and should offer forks to change the deed, or at least offer an alternative.”

“It usually does.” He bowed his head as he took the glass of wine, sipped a bit, then said, “This is why I have high hopes that one shall come forward to offer himself or herself.”

She nodded and took a long sip from her glass, then fell back in her chair, deep in thought.

“Charles, we have to succumb to her demands,” a man in his late fifties addressed the ruler of Zarzura. “The threat might be real.”

“Even if it is, what would stop her at one man or one woman?”

“A woman of around her thirties,” countered the opinion of the man.

“Did you consider that we would be her hostages for all eternity if we did what she asked for?”

“Roger is right, Marissa,” a woman around Roger’s age, said. “Even if it means being her hostages, the green nation will survive, and she is but one woman, and one day she will die.”

“Do you understand the implications, Rema?” A younger man charged the older woman, Rema. “This means at least five or six generations of greens would be under her beck and command, and even after she dies, we would be subject to the racist rules of the Order of Purification, never to be our own men and women again.”

“Ramon, nations outlast tyrants, history taught us that time after time.” Rema waved her hand in the air. “Remember Malachi? His family ruled for nine hundred years, but eventually, his family fell, all tyrants do.”

“You want to seal the fate of Zarzura for another nine hundred years? Are you even thinking about what kind of damnation you are sealing our people for?” Marissa shouted at Rema.

“Better damned, and surviving, than dead.” Roger stood less than an inch away from Marissa as he said that.

“Good people.” A tall and broad man in full armor who sat by the corner of the grand hall of the council of Zarzura said, “I have an alternative.”

They all stopped arguing and turned to him, including the ruler of the city, Charles.

“I am not a green, I am not subject to your rules.” “I will give myself to her,” The armored man said.

“Sir Mortimer,” Charles said softly. “You are not the one she wants, she wants a green.”

“Fine, then I will challenge her champion, the Grand Wizard in armed combat.” He sighed. “At least to buy you time.”

“Time to do what?” Roger asked him.

“Time to send messages of urgency to the purples and oranges, since the reds, yellows, and blues are backing the Order.” He hit the parchments placed in front of him. “It takes a pigeon four days to reach El Dorado, and another four to come back.” He shook his head slowly. “And you have only seven days, I can at least buy you this one extra day if I challenge the man on the seventh day.”

“And if he refuses, or if they kill you without a chance to duel with him, then what?” Rema asked him.”

“Then you have to decide within hours the fate of your race, and may the fates be gentle on you.”

“They are sending tens of pigeons each day.” Gertrude held a sheaf of parchments in her hand. “We intercepted most of them, but some passed through.”

“Doesn’t matter. Help will never reach in time, and we are expecting ten thousand more to join our troops from the blues and the yellows,” the Grand Wizard said.

“I still can’t fathom how you tilted their hands.” Rowida laughed. “This completely changed the war map, we are the most powerful among all of Agarthia because of this.”

“Every man and woman have a weak spot, a special desire, or a special need.” He laughed. “And I have this small voice in my head that tells me exactly what that is.”

Rowida stared at him for a few moments, *could it be that he also made a ‘Deal’?* But the signs were not there unless he was such a crafty man to be able to hide them so well.

*If you are deliberating whether the Grand Wizard has a contract with one of the Others, rest assured that he is not.* The dragon’s thoughts negated Rowida’s own.

*Then, what it is?* Rowida let a bubble of confusion burst at the surface of her mind.

*He talks to the fates, although I don’t think he knows it, he thinks it is his own inspiration.*

*And the fates just give him council? Just like that?*

*They can’t help it, he controls destiny, and in turn, controls them.*

“You are a formidable ally Grand Wizard.” Rowida leaned towards him and whispered, “And an equally formidable lover.”

“I demand to face your champion in a duel.” Sir Mortimer was sent down the side of the wall of Zarzura by a set of ropes and pulleys, and he now stood in front of the immense army of beast and man.

“One which shall determine the fate of Zarzura.” He drew out his weapon.

“Let your man come at me, I might be old, but I am a master at my craft, and my craft is the sword.” Sir Mortimer, walked slowly with raised arms, waving the sword in intricate figures of eight.

Rowida got out of her tent to the sounds of protest among the ranks, and a red guard stood beside her tent’s flap at attention.

“What is the cause of this commotion?” she asked him.

“A knight has descended the walls to challenge our champion, the Grand Wizard,” the guard said as he pointed to the tiny figure of Sir Mortimer.

“I see,” she said and started to walk fast to the front line.

The Grand Wizard stood with some of his lieutenants as he started to don his armor, preparing for battle.

She arrived at the spot and said softly, “He is just a distraction.”

“I know.” He smiled at her. “This is why I will kill him fast.”

“Is he a green?” She asked the men around the Grand Wizard, and they all shook their heads in negation.

“Then just shoot him full of arrows,” she said to the Grand Wizard.

“But I can take him,” he protested.

“I trust that you can and that it will be a very short fight.” She patted his armored shoulder. “But killing him with arrows, sends a message, one of mercilessness and ruthlessness.”

The grand wizard looked at her with admiration. “You are true to what they call you, the Dragon Lady.” Then he turned to his aides and said, “Do as the lady said, let him be an example of our mercy.”

“Is your champion afraid of me?” Sir Mortimer laughed loud.

Instead of an answer, a hundred arrows flew at him, and in moments he was falling, gurgling on his own blood.

The guards on top of the walls watched the last templar fall, and none could even attempt to help him.

A volley of arrows flew from the walls to the army troops camping outside, hitting nobody as the distance was beyond their reach. And this was the extent of their power, as opening the gate to fight for Sir Mortimer's body will nullify the power of the magical barrier.

Half an hour later, the ruler of the city stood at the parapets and shouted, "We beseech the leaders of the army, please allow us to retrieve the body of Sir Mortimer, to give him a proper burial in the embrace of our kind mother."

Ten minutes passed, then Rowida emerged from the lines of beast and men. "No, you shall not do anything of the like." She scoffed. "The body is a trophy of war, and tonight, as your city dies, it shall feed the beasts." Then she walked back through the wall of her troops.

"Zarzura, your hour has come." Rowida looked with worry-filled eyes at the Grand Wizard by her side.

"You have only thirty minutes, then your city burns," she shouted as loud as she could, lest the message not reach the rulers of the city.

A guard ran down from the wall and raced across the city to the government building. He pushed his way through the running aides and accountants to the council hall.

He entered panting and said, "We have only half an hour, my lords and ladies." Then he ran out.

"It is settled then, the greens die tonight." Rema sat with a straight back, looking hard into Charles' eyes.

"It is the only way out." He nodded.

"Will we be remembered?" Roger choked on the words.

"Yes, this day will be remembered, and I know that we will not just slip through history," Ramon said as he bent over the table.

"Then let the greens go down in history as a people who never bent the knee, even under the greatest of threats." Marissa had tears in her eyes, but she was smiling.

"The Arcanos had been placed in the right places, and when the moment comes, all will be recorded, to the last breath of the greens." Rema stood and paced the room as she talked.

"Let's hope the few hours Sir Mortimer bought us were enough." Charles reached with his hand to the man next to him, Ramon, who, in turn, reached to the others till all joined hands.

“Let us all send the message across time and place to the green boy or girl who shall heed it.” For a moment, all their bodies seemed to glow.

Half an hour passed, the Grand Wizard stepped from behind the lines of the troops and raised his arm to the sky, holding in it the Peace Granter. In seconds the sky started to darken, and lightning hit the ground once then twice, as the Grand Wizard chanted something in incoherent words. Then a bright light, like a thousand lightning bolts molded together, hit the center of the city and spread outwards in a circle of devastation.

Holes appeared in the wall of the city just as the light touched them, the guards on top disappeared in a gust of dusty wind. In less than ten seconds, the light died, and the vibration the entire army felt all those months from the magical barrier, stopped.

With a loud shout, the soldiers and beasts descended on the city, ravishing and destroying what remained of it. Survivors were the least lucky of the city populace, as each was slaughtered in inventive ways. Women were ravished by men then given to beasts to feed on them. Men were pulled from their houses and piled in front of the beasts to feed on. Soldiers ran amok through the beautiful streets and houses of the city, defiling the works of art everywhere and stealing what they could carry, and then some.

Copper artwork in door frames was pulled out, statues were smashed to get to the copper halo and eyes, anything within reach of the soldiers was up for the taking.

As the screams of the last of the greens were silenced, some of the more sensitive reds felt it first, then it was the beasts. The magical barrier was somehow reactivated, and the looters had to abandon the city in a rush as any who dallied, was consumed by the magical barrier advancing from the center of the city outwards, just like the death light the Grand Wizard unleashed hours before.

Zarzura had fallen, but still, the order lost this battle.

## Chapter 5 After the fall

Rowida rode her horse away from the ruins of the Green City, tailing her army as the magical defenses of the walls started to gain power again, possibly killing anyone within a five-mile radius who was not a green.

As she reached the very spot where the effect of the magic ended, she stopped, dismounted, and gazed forlornly at the destroyed city.

Her handmaid, friend, and emissary to the Order of purification, Gertrude, came towards her from the farthest lines of the army, now deep in the forest surrounding the city.

“My lady, you are too close to the reach of the magic.” Gertrude reached for the arm of Rowida. “Please, step some paces back.”

“They all died, Gertrude,” Rowida said wretchedly. “He followed on his promise, he didn’t even hesitate.”

“My lady, please come with me,” Gertrude insisted. “We can discuss how to follow through with the plan at the new campsite.”

“I told him I needed at least one of the greens.” Rowida turned viciously on her handmaid. “How could he have done that? How could he ignore my need so?”

“I beg you, my lady, please move back.” Gertrude reached to pull Rowida towards her. “We can plan payback for his careless behavior at the camp.”

Rowida pulled Gertrude’s arm, as Gertrude tried to pull back and said with ice tainting every word, “You are his emissary, you betrayed me as much as he did, you deserve worse fate even than his.”

“But I am your handmaid, even before I became his emissary to you, I have been by your side for thirteen years, you made me your liaison to the Order, my lady,” Gertrude said desperately as she squirmed in Rowida’s steel grip.

The air sizzled, and one strand of Rowida’s hair was pulled towards the ruined city. For a moment, it glowed bright, then it turned to dust, the magic of the walls was in full effect.

“You were his spy from the beginning.” Rowida pulled Gertrude’s arm towards the place where her hair was turned to dust as she said, “Who ever heard of a red handmaid? Liars, all of you are liars.”



Gertrude jerked backward as she pulled on her Vrill for strength, certain of her Vrill and its power, she pulled with her other arm on Rowida's.

Terror covered Gertrude's face with its green shade, she couldn't move the other woman at all.

*Don't do it Rowida, you will regret it,* the dragon's thought pierced through Rowid's mind.

Rowida didn't even acknowledge the thought.

"I am the Dragon Lady, you fool." Rowida threw her head back to give a long throaty laugh, then she said, "You think controlling all those dragons and magical creatures just happen? I am not fully human anymore; I am much more." As she said the last words, she hurled Gertrude towards the magic barrier.

Gertrude didn't even have the chance to scream, she glowed for a moment, and was instantly turned to dust.

Standing with her back to the city, Rowida looked at her feet and said, "He used me, and I believed him, he has a lot to answer for."

She looked back at the dust pile, which was her handmaid that started to blow away with the night's air, and said, "He will have to pay for your death Gertrude, I loved you so much, you were my best friend."

Then she walked slowly towards her army, thinking that today was lost, but she would always have tomorrow.

"Why were you sending my messengers away, Rowida?" The Grand Wizard sat on a black stallion as he approached Rowida, rain made his armor shine ever so brightly. "And where is our liaison, we need her to finalize the plan to take on the purples?"

"Why do you care?" she shouted at him as her mare pranced around his. "You killed them all, your men didn't spare a single one as I demanded from you."

"You can have a purple, or an orange." He spoke with a tone tinged with annoyance. "Why does it have to be a green?"

"Because I used to be one, and I can't take the aura of any different color," she screamed. "Now, you understand, do you?"

"Never worry, we will give you a green, we have the yellows and blues on our side."

He reached to touch her mare to calm the frightened animal. "We can ask them whatever we want and we will have a green baby if you wish, a whole lot of them."

“It is not as easy as that.” She hesitated, but she pulled her mare away from his hand.

“It is, I rule supreme above them all, and they will do it, if not willingly, then by force they shall.” He laughed as he again urged his horse to go near hers.

“They are powerful.” She started to calm. “You might not be able to force them.”

“I am far more powerful than you think, and you will lend me some of your Arcanos to make this even more so.” He reached his hand to her and pulled her for a kiss.

She surrendered to the kiss, then pulled away. “Gertrude was lost to the magic barrier, she can no longer be our liaison.” Rowida felt the gnawing pains of regret, eating her from her core out.

“No problem, I am giving you a whole retinue, one hundred men and women directly reporting to you.” He smiled and pulled the stirrups of her mare to lead her with his stallion to the new camp.

“Taking that village was a masterstroke, my lady.” The young woman bowed at least four times as she addressed Rowida.

“Relax, Marion.” Rowida sighed. “It was just a strategic point in our way, nothing more.”

Rowida rubbed her eyes, then turned back to her new handmaid. “When the Grand Wizard asked you to treat me with deference, he didn’t mean to cower in front of me, I am just a woman, like you.” She really missed Gertrude; she felt her loss day after day.

*I warned you not to do it.* The dragon’s thought carried a heavy degree of blame.

*I was blinded in my anger, and as you always have to point it out, I am heartless, you did that to me,* Rowida countered thought for thought.

*Yes, I did, and you will know why sometime in your future when it matters the most.*’ The dragon’s thoughts went back to being dormant after he passed this line Rowida.

“What is next, my lady?” Marion tried not to bow and only did it twice.

“We have to secure Mountain’s Child before advancing anywhere.”

Sanderson, the ruler of the blues for the last four years, was worried.

Upon receiving his seal of office, the most powerful spirit of nature contacted him for bonding, the queen of the dragons, and he was obliged by his new duties to accept. But of late, she

was acting strange, she woke him in the middle of the night to warn him against the Order's leader, even though she approved the move to ally themselves to the Order. Or, she would suddenly send him thoughts of pain, as nature suffered the onslaught of war.

His race, the blue aura people, had the ability to communicate with the spirits of nature, and of the dead, and most of his kind bonded with one or the other to gain extra powers or abilities, but he never heard before in all their history of an anguished dragon, because this was what the queen of dragons was.

He couldn't consult with any other spirit, as all were below her and would tremble in her presence, and he couldn't possibly tell what was happening to his people, lest they depose of him in this critical moment of their existence.

Sanderson knew he was the only man capable of taking the blues through the war with the least amount of casualties, and if he was to lose his position of power, the blues would suffer a lot, even more than the greens.

He ordered chamomile tea, known to sedate dragons, and sipped through his sixth cup of the day.

The yellows never had a ruler as such, their council had to debate each and every matter at hand till they reached an agreement of the majority, so, naturally, they had to resort to calling on the council of the Others, when a decision concerning a law or issue debated was split equally between council members.

Yellows didn't have to broker a deal to use the powers of the others, as it was a given ability of their aura to speak to the Others and even seek a portion of their powers. Only a few of the weaker yellows made a 'Deal' and only then for limited swathes of time.

Recently, the council was lingering a lot of issues, especially issues concerning the war and their dangerous allies, the order of purification. Every step since they signed with the Order of Purification, they had to call on the council of the Others.

Today, the issue at hand, which was discussed between the council of yellows and the Others, was sending more troops to the war front. Half the council thought they already sent more than enough of their men and women, the other half agreed but feared the anger of the enigmatic Grand Wizard, a man who all the Others said was very powerful and very dangerous, and according to the head of the council of the Others, defied the weaved patterns of fate.

The debate among both councils took all the hours of the day and then crawled into the night.

Then the decision was taken in five minutes, as the messenger of the Order arrived at their door, they agreed to send another two thousand of their finest to the war front.

## Chapter 6 War, A soldier's tale

-1-

**H**ustle and bustle passed through the ranks of the Griffin Order, the finest fighting body in the orange's army, but today was a different kind of hustle and bustle.

Four months since Zarzura fell have passed, and over this period, the oranges and the purples each had to fight on separate fronts to protect their sovereignty over their lands. Today, this changed.

It was the first trial to amalgamate purple wizards among the orange's soldiers, and in the order of the Phoenix, of the scouts, the same was happening. Even in the order of Pixie, the one responsible for espionage, and spy warfare, purples were getting the run of the operation and learning how to use their unique abilities to infiltrate and sabotage the enemy forces.

Oranges were always the best spies, as they could communicate with plants and animals. Some people even theorized the oranges must have learned the secrets of life and why we existed.

Purples, on the other hand, were able to control the elements. They performed miracles through that. Hence, everybody in Agartha knew them as magicians, wizards, witches, and sorcerers.

Pitting the two together could produce a new fighting way, purples backing orange soldiers in man to man fights, and orange soldiers protecting the purples as they managed the otherwise unbeatable magical creatures.

Peytr was one of the squad leaders tasked with molding the purples to the life of an orange soldier. He was a career soldier, ten years now on the job. When he graduated Nafoura, he didn't have plans as what was to be of his life, so, when he arrived at the city of the orange Aura nation, Meg Mell, he was open for anything on offer.

As all oranges, he had to attend the six months course on nature and her ways, then he was sent out for his year of communing with nature with three others. During that year, he discovered that he had an affinity to lead, as well as a keen skill with the sword and a fearless attitude towards death and death leading events. So, when he came back to the city, he was decided, he applied immediately to the army ranks. For the next ten years, he was a protector of the city, rising slowly through the ranks, until he became a squadron leader, then the war came crashing on their heads.

During the last four months, he lost almost half of his squad to the magical beasts led by the Order of Purification, and this made him more than malleable to the idea of including mages to his ranks. His second in command, Philip, known through the squad as Phil, was not happy by the inclusion of the three purples who arrived this morning at the barracks, as he said, “Those haughty, snobbish purples would treat us as their nursemaids and would manage to kill more of us than the reds.”

Even though they were now fighting reds, yellows, and blues, Phil insisted on calling all, “The reds,” something to do with the brutality of the reds since the start of the war. This might have to do with the one time Phil was captured with another woman soldier, and he barely managed to tell Peytr about the atrocities they did to her, which finally ended by decapitating her and dancing around with her entrails.

To this day, Phil always reminded Peytr he owed him his life. Peytr took a party of three in search of Phil and the other soldier, Myrtle, as both were acting as messengers from the main camp to their squad and they didn’t return within the allotted time.

Peytr didn’t need to see how they tortured the poor woman. His company barged on the dancing reds, her body lay scattered on the four corners of the camp, and her entrails drew a map around the camp’s fire of their earlier activities.

He didn’t even remember how the battle went, he was in a killing frenzy, something rare, but around one-tenth of the oranges experienced it when something heinous happened to them or to nature.

Peytr woke up from his reverie to inspect his new purple addition.

The three purples were young, yet they seemed to at least have some army training, as immediately, they fell in rank and formally talked to Peytr in a manner befitting a squad leader.

They were two women, Janna, and Roberta, and a man, Morris, and Peytr smiled as he saw the eagerness in their eyes, and he leaned to Phil. “They will do well, Phil, just watch over them till they get good at it.”

-2-

“Janna is down,” Phil screamed over the screeching roar of the wyvern. “We have to fill the ranks, now.”

Two months had passed since Peytr took the purples in his squad, they were no longer the purple addition, they were just soldiers Janna, Roberta, and Morris, they were part of his squad, and today, he lost one of his squad members, he added this day to his memory along all the days which he vowed to remember past the war.

Peytr gnashed his teeth, nodded to Phil, and pulled his long red-tipped sword, a gift from the purples, and rushed at the wyvern as he shouted, "Orange and purple, to me."

The wyvern alternated attacking the squad with its maw, then with its tail, and if somebody was unlucky enough, it gutted them with its sharp claws, as was Janna's fate, moments ago.

Peytr had been fighting the beasts for the last six months, and he developed certain techniques he passed onto his squad to devise a prearranged strategy to take the beasts down.

This strategy was reinvented once the purples joined his ranks, and it went as follows, the purples would bring the front line with air cushions to protect the oranges as they made the first lunge at the beast's eyes, then they would hurl earth projectiles to block the eye sockets, preventing them from healing, as the main advantage of the wyvern was its immediate healing capability. Then the oranges would hack at the beast's tail, rendering it useless as well as making it imbalanced.

Again, the purples would block the wound with earth to prevent healing, then came the last charge, the most dangerous of them. Both oranges and purples have to keep the beast's maw open to shoot it full of arrows, thus nudging its brain jewel out of place and killing it.

The only weapons able to penetrate the skin of magical creatures were those that had the magical red tint applied by senior purple magicians, and the supply was always less than the demand. But Janna went too close as she tried to seal the beast's eyes with earth, and it pulled her under its claws.

Now, Peytr had to do it the old way, he loaded his specially designed dagger with earth, as the others kept the beast busy, then he jumped on its back shoving the dagger in its left eye, which was about to heal, then by pressing a mechanism on the handle of the dagger, the earth would be released into the now punctured eye.

He did that and was thrown in the air twenty feet, and if it was not for Morris, who fashioned a fast cushion to aid him, he would have fallen inside the maw of the wyvern, lost in seconds.

Peytr still fell hard about ten feet off the fray. He shook his head to clear the buzzing then rushed back at the beast while screaming something primitive and guttural.

-3-

Phil jumped the ditch, then continued running, he had to reach the front line as fast as he could.

He got injured in the last battle, but today he heard the news, he left his sickbed and started to run from the camp, he had to return to his squad to warn them.

This part of the woods was almost dead, the Order of Purification passed this way a week ago, and the signs of their army's passage were clear. The soil looked a sickly gray, not the usual rich red and brown of Agarth, the trees exploded on both sides of the trail, and there were even tufts of the fur of a dozen species of animals mixed with the wood shards and the soil. They might not have the full power of the dragons on their side, but two wyverns decimated more than ten mixed squadrons that day, it took more than forty purples to finally kill the beasts.

All the while, the humans were fighting around the battle between the mages and the beasts, a lot of good men and women lost their lives that day. But Philip couldn't stop to give respect to the fallen, he had to reach the front line or another massacre would be repeated before the end of the day. He didn't even have the time to stop for a minute to ease the pains in his legs or the burning in his lungs.

He had to tell Peytr that the reds are coming and that they are coming with a king wyvern, it might take all the powers of the remaining mages within the ranks of the remaining squads to take the majestic creature down. He trusted Peytr would know what to do with this imminent conflict, he always did.

He ran as fast as he could, and he remembered the first time of many, Peytr saved his life. He had pulled him out of the way of a burning unicorn's horn, and as he stumbled to his feet with the aid of Peytr, he told him, "Live today to save me the next, Phil."

Today has to be that day, he would run three more hours added to the ones he already did, even if it killed him, for he had a brother at arms to save.

And maybe Peytr will then manage to save them all.

-4-

Emir stood on top of a rocky outcropping, facing the village he was supposed to conquer. It was an insignificant place, but it was the midpoint between Thule, the city of the blues, his nation, and El Dorado, the city of the purples, it also happened to be the only passage between the two cities, as south of it laid the desert of Royogju, where the rumored dragon temple was supposed to be.

The desert was vast, dry, and he had no guides in his command to traverse it. So, this small village of the oranges had to be conquered by the end of the day, to pave the road to El Dorado.

His bonded companion, a dryad spirit, hovered restlessly around him. She was not happy by the coming slaughter, and neither was he, but it had to be done. Emir hated the war, and he hated being part of it, but his loyalty was to his nation, and his nation demanded he applied his services of leading a fighting company in this war, so he did.



Emir looked back at the expectant men and women he led, this was the first mixed company of blues, yellows, and reds, in an attempt to match the success of the mixed units of the purples and the oranges.

He sighed and shook his head, not a single one of his entire company was past the age of twenty years, and before the war ended, as he hoped it soon would, most of them would be dead. Never to experience love or prosperity in their nations, never to be crowned heroes of war as most of them hoped, and never even welcomed with the shallow embrace of a defeated soldier, a brother or sister at arms.

He descended from the rock and headed to his lieutenants, and started to formulate the plan to take the village.

## Chapter 7 War, A victim's tale

-1-

A child wailed in its mother's embrace, not all the village residents could afford to send their pregnant women to Beimini, or their children to Nafoura, Claude thought as he walked one step after another, as all the others of his village did. An entire month passed since they started their forced diaspora.

The Order of Purification decided their village was a crucial point to secure for the war. They only learned of this as the commander of a company came crashing their gates.

Most of the elders of the village left to find a safe spot away from the fighting nations, *run to a better place, they said, establish a new community not involved with the machinations of the great ones, they said.* But now, one month had passed, and ten people fell to the jungle or the red gangs roaming it, and the safe haven, the better place, was nowhere in sight.

It was not that Claude despised this nomadic life, he would have embraced it without objection, if they didn't have this many children with them or this many injured people, or if they knew at least where they were heading.

In his short life of eleven years, he never witnessed this amount of violence, Nature was not that violent, even the predators, they killed sparingly, not humans though, he learned of recent that humans can't possibly be an outcome of nature, as nothing in nature was this vicious and evil.

He stopped listening to the elders, everything they said in the past proved to be a lie, humans were not products of nature like they told him, and the so-called balance was just old men's tales, as he had seen the path of devastation the warring factions left behind, and nothing came from nature to counter their destruction and mayhem.

He also lost belief in the benefits of an orange aura, and he wished for his aura to never settle, for what good was their aura, if all it communicated were the screams and wails of plants and animals.

The more powerful among his village even felt the pain of nature herself varying in intensity from one devastated area to the next, bending under pressure and halting the whole village to minister for their pains.

Claude didn't like Agartha at all, and if the chance came, he would leave the inner earth for the surface one. At least there, he would not feel the pain those people felt, the pain of the supposed mother of all, nature.

“No, please, Master soldier,” the woman cried as she clung to the tunic of the soldier. “Spare my daughter, please she is too young.”

The soldier who had the insignia of a burning tree, denoting him as one of the contingents under the Dragon Lady’s command, just laughed and kicked the woman viciously in the face.

She crawled after him, while she screamed, “Take me in her stead, please, have some mercy.”

“You wanted mercy?” He dropped the girl and returned to her mother, drawing his short sword as he walked towards her. “Here is your mercy.” He plunged his sword deep in her chest.

The woman looked at her daughter’s frightened eyes and whispered, “Run.”

Then she climbed up the sword and caught the hand which held it in a death grip, then she shouted louder, “Run.”

The girl looked with big eyes and trembling lips at her mother, but before her mother repeated the word for the third time, she started to run. She ran as tears flew behind her small frame, between soldiers maiming the people of the village, pillaging their lives’ work. She ran through their ranks at the border of the village, and she ran still, deep into the forest. She stopped when she finally hit a large shard of a broken tree and fell to her face, losing consciousness in the process.

The next morning, she woke up as something was licking her face. She shook the sleep from her eyes and jumped back.

A wolf pup was wagging its tail to her, it was a young one, as it didn’t change the color of its coat yet to the usual brown and red of older wolves. Its coat was just frosty grey. The wolf pup barked at her, then jumped back and forth, taunting her to play.

She smiled, and her smile hurt as her lip split when she fell last night, then all the memories of night before came back, overwhelming and flooding her.

She reached for the pup as fresh tears stung the cuts on her face. “Where is your mommy?” she asked the pup.

The pup approached her and nuzzled under her arm and whined a bit.

“I think they killed your mommy as they killed mine.” She hugged the pup and cried for some minutes.

Then the whimpers of the pup woke her up from her misery. She carried the pup and stood. “Don’t worry, I am a purple. I will find food and shelter for both of us.”

She kissed the pup which nestled happily in her arms.

“My name is Dahlia, what is yours?”

She rubbed the pup’s belly with one hand and it wiggled its paws in pleasure as a response.

“I will call you Hardy because you survived the hardships of the war.”

She smiled and didn’t mind the pain coming with the smile.

“Now, let’s find something to eat, the soldiers always leave lots of dead small animals in track, one must be fresh enough to eat.”

-3-

“Vlad, please, we have to go.” A young woman pulled on a young man’s arm. “They will come after us, please.”

“Mary, they have killed my whole family, as if they were cattle.” Vlad looked in a daze at the burning farmhouse. “I lost everything in less than an hour.”

“Please, Vlad, we have to move, or would you want to face your parents’ fate?” Mary shook him hard.

He finally looked at her with sad eyes. “Escape Mary, I have nothing to run for.”

She slapped him hard, that tears started to flow from his eyes. “You have your life, you fool, you can gain everything back.”

“With what?” he cried. “There is no farm to come back to, the manticores poisoned the land beyond salvation.”

“You can trade, your father was not just a farmer.” She pulled him, and he started to walk slowly by her side. “Your father was a frugal trader, you can do this with almost nothing, I believe in your abilities.”

Vlad followed her as tears ran hot on his cheeks. He allowed her to drag him as he thought, *Trade with whom? There will be no villages left standing after this cursed war ends.*

He walked beside Mary, his betrothed, hoping death would catch them swiftly in the next days, hope was too painful to contemplate, death was a mercy.

“Mellie, take this fruit to the elder.”

A woman in her late thirties, and a large scar crossing a once beautiful face, gave a half-ripe fruit to Mellie. “It is soft enough for her ruined teeth.”

Mellie nodded and walked back through the makeshift camp towards the bed of the last elder of the village.

All four other elders died in the first month since they had to run out of their village. Mellie thought sadly, so had most of the young children.

Mellie graduated Nafoura only a few months before the war. She didn’t even get to finish her studies in Meg Mell when news Zarzura’s fall reached them.

The city council decided to ease the burden for a coming war by sending all village born graduates to their home villages. By the time she reached the village, she was only a few days ahead of the reds, and she didn’t even get to settle down or even see both her parents. Her father was drafted in the war effort, as he served in his youth as a squad lieutenant, this was why her parents could afford to send her to Nafoura in the first place.

Her mother, once considered the most beautiful of the oranges, now had a scar to mark her as past beauty, a reminder that would never leave her of the horrors of the war.

“Thank you, Mellie.” The elder smiled a toothless smile. “You would be a great woman someday, I have seen it in my dreams.”

“I just hope that I will see my father again, elder Agatha.” Mellie smiled sadly.

“You will, and he will come victorious.” The old woman started to doze off just as she finished her sentence.

Mellie sighed and walked back to her mother.

## Chapter 8 War, Is change

-1-

“We need a faster way to move the injured from the battlefield,” Gina, the head of the healers, and councilwoman of the purples stated in front of the war council of both nations.

“They either die on the way or hinder the soldiers carrying them, leading to both their deaths,” she insisted.

“This is actually something worth our time.” The head councilman of the purples eyed another councilman with blame. “And we should put our engineers to devise a way as soon as they finish demolishing the bridges.”

“We can use air cushions to pull them out of the fighting zone,” suggested a purple councilman.

“Can an orange drive this cushion out of the fighting zone?” an orange councilman asked.

“No, a purple has to move it with their rod,” the purple councilman answered.

“Then it won’t do, we need all the purples on the battlefield,” the head councilman of the oranges said and looked at another councilwoman. “Didn’t your people suggested something pulled by trained dogs to stock supplies?”

“Yes, we did, we started with twenty dogs, they will be ready within a fortnight,” the councilwoman said.

“Can’t you train them to pull injured men and women then?” he asked her.

“I guess we can, we will just need to increase the number of dogs pulling the flatbed cart out,” she said.

“Why not use horses?” Gina asked.

“We need all of them to face the rider units of the reds, and before you ask, oxen are too slow.”

-2-

“So, this way, we can fill our water without having to stop.” The young orange soldier showed his contraption to his commander.

“Interesting, it would save us time, and might be good as we run from a lost battle.” The commander pulled on the series of reeds and tubes connected to the water skin at the end. “But don’t you think it is too much to carry around?”

“It is made of reeds to be easy to assemble and disassemble, plus the whole thing weighs less than a pound.”

“If we were in peacetime, you would have made a handsome living from selling this contraption.” The commander laughed. “Still, I will show it to high command when we reach the camp.”

-3-

“This is a new type of arrow, I invented it to battle wyverns,” Morris said to Peytr.

“What exactly it does?”

“Well, we have first to shoot the eyes of a wyvern then seal it with earth, right?”

“Right.”

“These are magic tinted arrows, just like your sword is tinted, only they will draw power from each other to dig inside the skull of a wyvern, and knock the brain diamond from its place, immediately killing the wyvern.”

“Did you test this?”

“Well, yes, on a manticore, but the principle is the same.”

“Can it be mass-produced?”

“I am not sure, but we will have to retire at least a third of the purples to mass-produce it.”

“If it does what you say it does, then it is worth it.”

“You made my day, commander.”

“As you did mine, most humble and courageous of all purples.”

-4-

“Council members, I have a way to end the war,” Yohana, the head of the purple council, declared to the gathered war council.

The hubbub was instant, almost everybody spoke at once.

She waited till they all quieted down, then said, “One of our scholars was studying long-forgotten spells from lore, and a few months ago she happened on the most powerful spell ever cast.” She paused. “The scholar, Bridgette, found the spell that took out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“But that was an act of godly power, and it is not within human reach,” an orange councilwoman shouted.

“It might have been, but this was not the final aim of our scholar, she didn’t want to be remembered as the woman who killed two races.” Yohana signaled the excited council members to calm. “She worked for the last three months on modifying the spell, from one of lethal power to one of banishment.”

“And did she succeed?” the same orange councilwoman asked.

“Yes, in theory, she even tested it on one platoon of reds last week.” Yohana paused for effect. “And it worked perfectly.”

“Where did they get banished?” another councilman asked.

“We are not sure, but she has three theories. The first is that the people affected get suspended in a single moment, thus disappear from every passing moment after that.” She took a deep breath. “The next of her theories is that they get sent back in time, but how far she is not sure.” She swallowed hard. “The last theory is that they get thrown into the primordial hell, Tartarus.”

“That’s a myth,” shouted another councilwoman.

“As I said, it works, but we don’t know where they end up.” She sighed. “Does it really matter if it ends the war and spares thousands of lives?”

“It does to the ones banished, but again, it is the lesser of all evils, and we can work on bringing the banished back once peace returns,” the head of the orange council said

“This is all good, but who will be banished, the reds, the yellows, or the blues?” asked the same councilwoman from before.

“We have decided on the yellows and blues, as they are costing us the heaviest losses, even more than the magical beasts,” Yohana said.

“When can we do this?” the head of the orange council asked.

“First, we need to retrieve every single purple from the battlefield,” Yohana said, and the hubbub returned ten folds.

“Please allow me to explain.” She raised her rod to make her voice resonate higher. “It took Bridgette and another group of ten scholars to banish the thirty reds, so, we need all the purples out of the battlefield, and hope it is enough.”



“For how long?” The head of the oranges asked.

“A week, maybe ten days.” Yohana bowed her head, waiting for the coming attack of protests, but none came.

“We can stand the war front for ten days without purple support, just name your time to start.” The head of the oranges said to the nodding of approval from his entire council.

For ten days, the oranges fought alone against the joint power of the Order of Purification, the number of casualties was terrific. One-third of their number fell in these ten days, and their army had to retreat all the way to the gates of Meg Mell.

The city prepared for a long siege and the army withdrew to the walls of the city, hoping that what happened to the greens would not happen to them as well.

And on the night of the tenth day, as all oranges stayed waiting for the inevitable, a dark cloud raced all over Agarthia. Then it was followed by a very bright light coming from everywhere at once. When that was gone, so was every single member of the yellow and blue nations.

Only the reds were left.

-5-

*Rowida, I have to leave you.* The dragon’s thought felt detached, erratic even.

*What? Why?* Rowida felt panicked.

*Our Queen was bonded to the ruler of the blues when they got banished.* The dragon felt distant. *And we have to find her and bring her back, or all of our kind will perish.*

*But will you come back to me after that?* Rowida was already feeling the pain of separation from her long-time friend, soul, and advisor.

“I will try.” The dragon stood in front of Rowida in full form, then he beat his wings hard, pushing all the tents in this part of the camp of the ground, then it flew towards the sun.

In a second, he disappeared completely, leaving Rowida crying on the ruins of her tent.

In the next month, the reds were pushed all the way to their home city, Akakor, suffering immense losses on their way. The beasts abandoned Rowida the moment the dragon left her and started to attack her soldiers as they charged out of the battlefield.

The Grand Wizard visited Rowida one last time, telling her he had to go on a quest for the most powerful Arcanos in lore and that he lost the Peace Granter when the blues and yellows were banished.

By the end of that month, the reds raised the white flag and demanded to negotiate their surrender. Rowida was left with a company of only fifty men, and she took them into hiding, in Mount Drake till the dust after the war settled.

The war was over.

### PART 3- THE WORLD AFTER THE WAR



## Survivors

-1-

Peytr stood on the hill overlooking the barracks, having his eyes full of the place that was his home for most of his life, a place where he grew to be the man he was today.

He had led his squad in way too many battles for him to remember, during the year that it took for the oranges and purples to execute their massive spell that banished the yellows and the blues out of this realm of existence, he lost more than half the members of his squad.

The men and women whom he lost, were all brother and sisters, as nothing brings a group of people together, as the touch of death on their hearts.

Even the purples, became his, they were his men and women, and the ones who he lost, would always be marked on his soul as failings to save his own.

Today, the peace treaty was signed, and the war was over, all the drafted men and women were let go to resume their lives from before the war, but he knew they would never be the same. They returned to their people as strangers, aliens who happened to carry the faces of past loved ones.

He decided then to end his military career, he couldn't bear the idea of seeing the savage reds going free with the atrocities they did during the war. Peytr also didn't feel he had a place in the city anymore, for what need would the city have for a broken man, an ex-soldier?

He would join four of his men and together, they would join one of the refugee villages they passed through during the war, a small place that hugged the mountain at the edge of the nation of the greens, now almost empty as all the green were dead.

Peytr sighed and nodded as he saw the new recruits assembled in the court of the barracks. He gave them a silent salute from the heart, turned, and joined the four men on their long journey to the village that hugged the mountain.

The locals called it "Mountain's Child," he hoped it would be his new home.

-2-

Mellie cried softly, no sounds came from her shaking frame, no one should know of her pains, but the tears flowed in torrents, slowly wetting her cotton shirt.

She came back to her village this morning, with all the other orange refugees who escaped when the troops of the Order of Purification stormed the gates of their insignificant village. She thought bitterly, her village was so insignificant they could only be allowed by the city nation of the oranges to send six children every year to the school of Nafoura, the irony was, Mellie used to be one of the six children sent on her year as her father was a retired soldier.

She had only returned to her village after studying in Nafoura for a few weeks when the war came, just started to commune with nature enough to have her own small field of corn, the most friendly and cooperative of plants.

When they escaped the attack, only a third of them came. The others either stood to fight or were already dead on the first assault. Now, a year later, she came back, with only one-fifth of the people who escaped alongside her, the rest fell to the marauding reds, the elements, or just from the anguish nature was screaming in their heads almost all the time.

She lost her father and mother to the war, as well as her two older brothers. Mellie was thankful she was not as powerful with her Vrill, or as sensitive to nature's calls as some of the others who fell, this was ultimately the main reason she survived.

But for what?

The village laid in ruins, not a soul left alive in the whole place, and to make it worse, the scars to nature were too strong and violent even for someone who was as sensitive to nature as her, which was not much.

The tears flowing were only partially self-pity tears, sadness, and anguish to what happened to the village, most of her tears as the people who came back with her were caused by nature's screams of agony at the spot of the massacre.

Before the sunset, they all paid their respect to the dead, and to their anguished mother nature, and moved on. They split into groups of threes and fours to seek either the city, which had its own burdens or one of the refugee villages they saw along their pilgrimage back home.

Mellie wiped her tears and approached the group's leader who decided to head towards the green nation, theorizing this would be the least dangerous area, as all the greens were wiped out, and the marauding gangs left after the war had nothing to gain there.

She turned one last time, before walking fast to join the others, hoping for a reason to live.

Three years had passed since the end of the war, and Vlad was not happy with his last trade. In fact, he was regretting it with all his heart. Fifty crates of beets seemed like a good enough bargain for just one crate of copper, but that was three weeks ago. Now that three villages on his trade route refused the beets with passion, he started to think he was tricked.

His route had almost a hundred small villages that were not under the domain of any of the big nations' cities, that was, in Vlad's way of thinking, a brilliant venture in the long term. These cities always lacked something another faraway village had in plenty, and he used this knowledge to circle between them at least once every three months, then visited one of the big cities with the best the villages could offer. But of course, it was not perfect, the cities dealt with the coin of the land, either the purple Drake or the orange Blossom was the only accepted coinage in those cities, unlike the villages.

The villages had no use for the coin of the big cities, most of them were too far away, or simply wouldn't accept to trade with the mixed color villages, so, he had to trade goods for goods in the villages.

Four years ago, a business like Vlad's couldn't even have existed, as, before the wars, there was nothing like those villages in existence. In fact, all the villages of the pre-war era owed allegiance to one of the big cities, and there were thousands of them all over the land. After the war, the refugees of the devastated villages were many, but most were denied residence in any of the cities they once paid homage to.

Eventually, new villages had risen, made up of those refugees, and as the status of affairs was, the villages grew to have mixed color residents in them, some even allowed marriage between colors, a sacrilege as seen by most Agarthans.

Vlad sighed. He would have to trade the beets in the next village. They were already starting to smell. He might be able to sell them off as animal feed, or even fertilizer primer. He would manage to get rid of them. He always managed situations like this one in the past ten years since he became a trader.

Vlad then smiled and whipped his oxen to go a bit faster, he had fifty crates of beets to unload in the next village.

Darren walked slowly, dragging his feet, his mind was wandering aimlessly. This was not supposed to happen.

He tried to avoid the looks of the other people as he walked through the town, he would be forced to vacate his rooms by the end of the day *if* they allowed him to stay till the end of the day. They would then drag him screaming and fighting to the southernmost part of the city, as they did with any of his kind. There, he would live the life of an outcast for the rest of his days.

He couldn't imagine how did his life go in such a spiral. First, master Dalmatius told him he was a red, which was anything but what he wished for. He wanted to be an orange, one with nature, as he was a poet at heart, and nothing like talking to trees and animals would have inspired a young poet to become one of the greats. But as a red, he could only expect to be fighting in a war, get injured in a war, or get killed in war; this was the nature of the nation of the Red Aura, warlike.

Yet, it was not enough he was a red, things had to be even worse. Yesterday, he joined some men in a hunt, as was expected of a young man of his age, but the hunt didn't go as planned, a bear viciously attacked the group, killing two of the five men on the spot.

Darren didn't know what came over him, all he remembered was something primal, violent, and as vicious as the bear coming from inside his body, pulling on his soul, and then he was standing over the slain bear drenched in blood and panting.

The surviving men were more disgusted by him than thankful as they immediately tied him up and led him back to face the ruler of the city, and along the way, they called him names, like "Mutt," and "Beast," but what really caused Darren to panic was they called him, "filthy shapeshifter."

Every generation of reds, some would show the same signs that came over Darren, as instead of calling an animal power to their own through their Vrill, they changed into the animal itself. Those, the reds considered to be less than human and were segregated from the rest of the society, to live among their kind.

Suddenly, Darren stopped his walk of shame and came to a conclusion. He couldn't stay with the reds as he would never accept to live the miserable life of other shapeshifters. He would escape the city before they tried to take him to that horrible place, "Beast pens," as they called it.

He walked with purpose, and started to plan his escape; he never wanted to be one of them anyway.

He looked at the young ones with envy. He wished he could do what they did, run like them, laugh like them, kiss other young ones in stolen moments like them. But, of course, he couldn't. He was

not like them, they were flesh and blood, while he only was a force, a disembodied mind, governed by a very keen and strong will, he was one of the Others.

He smiled, he might envy those young men and women their moments, but he lived all the times at once, he saw the future and the past, as they saw the colors of the flowers surrounding them.

If he could sigh, he would have sighed a very hot and long sigh now.

He seldom entertained the notion of visiting the world of humans, let alone interacting with one of them, but he had to do this today, or the future changes yet again.

His kind knew one constant, and that was life, they willed themselves to live, and they appreciated and valued life above anything else, and if he didn't make a move today, life might be extinguished from this spot of the universe.

Others of his kind would occasionally toy with the minds of men, driving them insane in the process, but they gave precious gifts in return. They were the voices in the heads of prophets, the harbinger of dark omens to practitioners of the dark arts, the muse behind every great work of art, spoken, written, or visual, these were their precious gifts to all life forms in the universe.

Some called them angels, some called them demons, a lot of people thought they were a figment of their imagination, some even tried to banish them. But only the ones who they deemed useful enough to bond with had any power over his kind, the ones who were offered the 'Deal.'

Today, he singled a boy, the one called by the others Darren, and he would bond with him, giving part of himself to the boy and taking a part of the boy into him in the process.

Darren would have to make the 'Deal,' or all life would be lost. He had to do it today before it was too late.

He decided on a name for the boy to be able to call onto him, he decided that he should call himself, Mr. Black.

-6-

"Hey you," Darren shouted at the man standing silently at the entrance of the market for more than an hour. "Why are stalling the entrance of the market?"

"Interesting," said the man. "You think I am stalling?"

"I asked you a question, and I don't accept the answer to be another question," Darren spoke in a firm voice, as he resisted his desire to growl.



“Well, I am not stalling. “Did you see anybody slowed down from entering or leaving the market from where I stood?” the man said.

“Yet another question.” Darren was getting furious with the man.

“Humor me for a moment,” the man said with a smile. “You have been standing at the same spot, staring at me for almost an hour, was I stalling the entrance?”

Darren was silent for a moment too long.

“I see.” The man laughed and continued, “But as you see yourself, the protector of this backward village, you decided to occupy your time by harassing an old man, right?”

“Can’t you at least talk without framing every statement as a question?” Darren was growling, a low rumble in the deepest reach of his chest.

“I can, and I will.” The man started to move away, then he turned back all of a sudden and looked intently at Darren and said, “You think that you are happy here, and you enjoy your role as village guardian, even though they hate you for being a red.”

Darren reached to pull the man by his scruff, but his hands landed on nothing. They just went through the still smiling man’s body.

The man laughed, to Darren’s terror.

“Who are you?” Darren squinted in an attempt to see the aura of the ethereal stranger, but when he saw none, he shouted, “What are you?”

“My name is Black, Mr. Black.”

The smile lingered on his face as he said, “And I am here to offer you the Deal of a lifetime.”

He paused for effect. Reading Darren’s face told him the young man was ready to hear what he had to offer, so he said, “I can change your aura from red to orange, as you desire.”

“How do you know that?” Darren whispered in fear.

“Why, I am your best friend.” Black smiled and continued, “Or I will be, once we strike a Deal.”

## IN ANOTHER WORLD:

### The last of the templars

“Let it be recorded for posterity.” A man with a greying beard sat with eleven other men, and one of them had a paper and quill, which he recorded the meeting with. “That on this day of our Lord, March the sixth, 1254 A.D., we have decided to open the parcel found in the grave of the Grand Master Hugh De Payens, in our desperate attempts to find a way to vanquish the monsters who had taken over our world.”

“Let me see what you wrote to this point, Girard.” The man who was dictating to Girard passed his eyes quickly over the words and returned the paper to him.

“Record this, please.” He opened the parcel tightly wrapped in leather and bound by copper wire with some difficulty. “On opening the parcel, we found a bound book.”

He passed the book to the man to his right.

“And six small hourglasses.”

He turned one of the hourglasses over and over, and faint green throbbing liquid could be seen inside, then he said, “The hourglasses are made from a strange material, warm to the touch, that resembles glass, and they don’t have sand inside, instead they have a strange luminous liquid.”

“Did you write everything till now, Girard?” He looked up from inspecting the hourglass.

“Everything, Sir Mortimer,” Girard said.

“Good, now let’s check the book.”

The man who sat to his right gave him back the book unopened.

“Let’s hope Grand Master Hugh De Payens left instructions on how to battle flying lizards.” Sir Mortimer smiled a sad smile and started to search through the pages, then he stopped to read aloud. “On the first of November of the year of our lord, 1135, a man came to me with a bound tome and a small box.” Sir Mortimer turned the page then went back to where he stopped.

“He told me that in a hundred years, an invasion will happen on all the Christian world, indeed, on the whole world, Christian or otherwise.”

Sir Mortimer looked up with wild eyes, then returned to his reading. “He said that people would ascend from earth’s core, bringing with them Wyverns, a type of mythical flying lizard.”

“By the Lord, this was a prophecy come true,” the man sitting next to Sir Mortimer said excitedly.

“It seems so, Sir Paul.” Sir Mortimer returned to reading. “The man who called himself Malachi said that we will have no means of defeating the wyvern or their short riders.”

Gloom descended on the occupants of the room.

“But a way can be devised to prevent their ascent from the inner earth before it happens.” Sir Mortimer sighed. “I wish that we had started excavating the tombs a decade earlier.”

As Sir Mortimer was about to close the book, Sir Paul urged him, “Please read on, if it is indeed a prophecy, then it would provide a means for salvation.”

Sir Mortimer sighed a long sigh, then went back to the book. “Indeed, as Malachi said, the way for the twenty men who will find these words, is by going onto inner earth, and back to a time before the knight of shadows had taken possession of the ultimate Arcanos, I don’t condone of Tarot cards and their usage, but I listened on.”

Sir Mortimer stopped to breathe heavily for a few seconds, then went back to his reading. “These are the points, Malachi, mentioned as entrances, and he said the seals would be broken to allow passage of the wyverns, so, these men would descend with ease.”

Sir Mortimer turned the page, and there was a folded paper, he unfolded it, and it was a map of England where the knights gathered, and one point of entry was south of the Tower of London where they gathered, he passed the map to the men around the table, then resumed his reading.

“The man, Malachi, mentioned an ancient prophecy about colors, a shadow man, and a light man, I included part of it, as I didn’t understand its meaning of yet.”

“There some lines in Latin here, the first line reads ‘The fate of two worlds rests on the shoulders of a few unsuspecting souls’”

“Sir Mortimer, we have to study the rest of the book carefully.” Sir Paul stood and put his hand to his heart. “For I swear to follow it to my death if it stops the massacres, we have to live through each day.”

“Let’s all swear on it.”

## Excerpt from the Green Boy

### Book 1 of The Chronicles of Agarthia

The alarm lights and the whistle, clicked in his mind, danger was near, so he pulled his bow and an arrow, knocked the arrow to the bow, and crouched to the direction of his immediate north.

His fingers held tight to the bow, light on the arrow, and he breathed in and out as rhythmically as he could, waiting for the inevitable arrival of what he assumed was a beast, a predator of some sort.

His wait was not long. As he counted his fortieth breath out, the branches of the trees parted violently, and a big cat came bounding his way, he released the arrow without a moment of thought, hitting the great beast right between the eyes.

As he stood to check his prize, he noticed something was emitting a whistle in his backpack. He knew this must be the alarm system, and something was still coming his way.

He fell to the ground as fast as he could when he realized the danger had not passed him yet. Quickly drawing two arrows, one regular and another with the magical red tip, he once again started to count the breaths after knocking both arrows to the bow—a technique he learned from Miss Julia, to use when in doubt of the incoming target.

Sure enough, almost as swift as the tiger before it, the enormous head of a land-bound wyvern crashed into his sight. Ethan released the arrows immediately, hitting the great creature in both its eyes at once, the red-tipped arrow seemed to burrow deeper into its skull.

Of course, this didn't counter the momentum of the great beast, but at least it forced it to tilt its head sideways as it crashed into Ethan, instead of being crushed in its maw, which was a blessing.

Ethan was thrown off the spot he had crouched in by some ten meters. Dazed and bruised, he knocked another red-tipped arrow as he ascended erratically to his feet. The monstrous creature screeched its distinct screeching roar at the world in pain, as it now had both eyes blinded by Ethan's arrows.

**(To Be Continued in The Green Boy) Be sure to check the next book in the series:**

**The Green Boy, at <https://books2read.com/u/3Ge00K>**

## CHARACTERS AND GLOSSARY

**Akakor:** A legendary city, home of the red Aura nation.

**Agartha:** A mythical land supposed to be in the hollow core of the Earth.

**Arcanos:** Magical objects, believed to have originated in the Golden Age of Agartha, represented by the people who created them in the deck of Tarot cards.

**Aura:** A halo of different colors surrounding all living things that can only be seen by gifted individuals, also a defining class system according to the color in Agartha.

**Avalon:** A legendary city, inaccessible to most people.

**Beimini:** A legendary city, and house of the school of Nafoura, also the home of the fountain of youth.

**Black, Mr.:** An ethereal being, a member of the race only known as the others, of which some are malevolent and others are benevolent.

**Blue Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agartha, known to be distant and separated from humanity, as they can commune with the spirits of the land.

**Boyar:** Mayor of a village, as many are spread out through the land of Agartha.

**Charles, Lord:** Last ruler of the green Aura nation.

**Darren:** A boy whose aura's color is red, and he is also a shapeshifter

**Diamond Sun, The:** Theorized to be the source of light and warmth in Agartha, a reflector of the actual sun's rays from the surface, believed to have a tip hidden in the upper world.

**Dalmatius, Master:** Keeper of the fountain of youth, and headmaster of the school of Nafoura, nobody knows anything about his origins, and he is kept immortal through the powers of the fountain of youth.

**Dragons:** A race of intelligent magical spirits, who are the representation of Nature's magic.

**Eldorado:** Legendary city of gold, home of the nation of the Purple Aura.

**Ethan:** A boy from Beimini, accompanied by Rowida to the surface world, as both were known as the green children of Woolpit.

**Gertrude:** A red girl, later becomes the handmaid of the Dragon Lady, Rowida.

**Grand Wizard, The:** The enigmatic leader of the order of purification, has a unique silver grey Aura.

**Green Lady, The:** Also known as the Dragon Lady, Rowida, a girl who was banished from Agartha to the surface for the worst of crimes, came back as a ruthless woman who started the purification war, obsessed about the disappeared leader of the order of purification and finding the last green boy.

**Green Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agartha, known to be very good craftsmen, have the ability to give understanding or confusion, and they have an affinity to earth metals and water.

**Golden Age, The:** An era of great knowledge and prosperity in the history of Agartha, equivalent to 5000 B.C. - 2000 B.C. in our time.

**Mathias:** A green son of a merchant, first victim of Rowida.

**Mariah, Mistress:** Keeper of the nursery half of the legendary city of Beimini.

**Mary:** An orange nation refugee, betrothed to Vlad.

**Meg Mell:** A legendary city, home of the orange Aura nation.

**Mellie:** One of the orange nation's refugees.

**Morris:** A purple mage, an added soldier to the squad of Peytr.

**Nafoura:** The only school of its kind, where all the children of Agartha go to study till, they graduate as adults, requires a yearly donation from each village and city to accept the children.

**Orange Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agartha, known to be timid and shy, they have the ability to communicate with animals and plants, and are natural lie detectors.

**Order of the Agarthan Templars, The:** A dedicated body of scholar knights, believed to have perished during the war of Purification.

**Order of the Diamond Sun, The:** A secret order consisting of several believers in a prophecy that was told at the end of the golden age, stating that all the colors have to be present to change the fate of Agartha.

**Order of Purification, The:** A racist order that believed in the cleansing of auras, naming the basic color auras as the only pure races, namely Blue, Red, and Yellow.

**Petyr:** A squad Leader of the orange nation army.

**Phil:** Lieutenant to Peytr.

**Purple Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agartha, known to uncharitable and usually demanding steep prices for their services, have control over the elements, considered to be a nation of magic users.

**Red Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agartha, known to be violent and warlike, the first nation to fully support the order of purification during the purification war,

some of them can shapeshift, have the ability to read the aura of others, and mask their own aura and that of others, possessed of inhuman strength and blood lust.

**Ryogoku:** A vast desert, believed to be the home of the Dragon Temple.

**Silver Age, The:** An Era where some of the knowledge of the golden age was lost, famous for so many battles that eventually pushed the entire land into a far less prosperous age, equivalent to 2000 B.C. to 1200 A.D. in our time.

**Shangri La:** A legendary city, home of the yellow Aura nation.

**Thule:** A legendary city, home of the blue Aura nation.

**War of Purification, The:** A war that was started by the green lady and an army of magical beasts against the nation of the Green Aura, by besieging their white city of Zarzura, later to be joined by the leader of the order of purification and his army of Red Aura soldiers, leading to the destruction and annihilation of the entire Green Aura nation, ended by the collation of colors made by the Orange Aura nation and the Purple Aura nation who banished the Yellow and Blue Aura nations, when they joined forces with the Red Aura Nation, thus ending the war.

**Violet:** One of the Others, brokered a Deal with Rowida.

**Vlad:** An orange aura man who has a trading business between the villages and cities of Agarthia.

**Wyvern:** A serpentine relative of the dragon, although less intelligent, one of the many magical creatures that inhabit Agarthia.

**Yellow Aura Nation, The:** One of the six nations that inhabit Agarthia, known to be peaceful and understanding of others, have the ability to communicate with the others, a mysterious race of all-powerful ethereal beings.

**Zarzura:** The white city, home of the Green Aura nation, destroyed during the war of purification.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

### **Sherif Guirguis**



An Egyptian by birth, cosmopolitan by convection, Sherif started writing at a very young age, and he didn't stop since then. He always thought that our world needed a dash of magic, and this is what he always included in his writings.

Originally a medical doctor, but he decided to leave medicine behind to pursue his passion for the word since then he wrote three books.

The chronicles of Agarth: Book 1 - The Green boy, is his third book, his first was "The Door", a magical realism thriller, and the second was "The Trinity's Dream", a contemporary fantasy about the end of days.

He is happily married and has two daughters, whom he adores.

He is always happy to receive news from his readers on his email:  
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