

Through the Storm
A Prequel to
The Chronicles of Agartha

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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 Agartha.”

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 Agartha.”

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 Agartha 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 Agartha, 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 Agartha.

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 Vril 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'.

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