

Chapter 1

A burst of crimson Magence splits the air, igniting the pre-dawn gloom with a dazzling explosion. Tendrils of energy weave across the field, stitching through the chaos with wild, flaring colors. Another blast, deep purple this time, veers perilously close to the crystalline tower, sending a rain of shrapnel against the stone plinth below.

Benna races into the fray, his blue robe a flash of color against the smoke-choked sky. Each footfall is precise, a series of measured hops carrying him over splintered ground. His long ears twitch in constant motion, tracking every crack and thrum of Magence as it ricochets through the battlefield. The air is thick with the ozone tang of magic and the acrid smoke of destruction, pressing against his chest as he weaves through the tumult.

Ahead, the towering silhouette of the Maginist Tower looms against the dark horizon, a giant shard of crystal carved to resemble a Howl. At the base of its rocky plinth, two Sar Ala break away from the main clash. Their silver skin catches the light in a blaze of iridescent brilliance as they dart around the corner, disappearing from view.

Benna's chestnut fur ripples with the wind of his passage as he changes course to follow them. The ground is littered with debris—shattered carapaces and spent Magence sigils—that crunches beneath his paws. He navigates the clutter with nimble agility, leaping over obstacles and slipping past clashing figures locked in battle. To his right, a streak of gold and white arcs across the sky, striking the ground with a shuddering roar that momentarily drowns out the distant cries of panic and pain.

He pushes onwards, a force of will driving him as much as his powerful legs. The smell of burning fur and flesh wafts through the air, mingling with the bitter dust kicked up by the struggle. Shadows of towering stone pillars flit past as he closes the gap to the corner of the Tower. The structure itself is a marvel of Magence architecture: its translucent walls shimmer like ice in the first light of dawn, ghostly and beautiful against the chaos surrounding it.

Another volley of Magence, raw and unbridled, erupts behind him, filling the air with a symphony of destruction. He doesn't flinch, focused entirely on his quarry. He rounds the corner, breath quickening, each beat of his heart echoing with the urgency of his pursuit.

A smaller skirmish ignites to his left, momentarily obscuring his view as a group of Maginists intercept another cluster of Sar Ala. Magence lights up the scene with a furious blaze, and the world narrows to a point as Benna cuts through the smoke, eyes set on the space behind the Tower where the two silver figures vanished.

It's quieter here, though only just. The sounds of combat linger as a distant clamour, like a storm raging beyond the horizon. Pebbles scatter beneath his feet, and a soft, rhythmic exhale hisses past his teeth as he presses on, relentless in his chase. The chaos of the battlefield churns behind him, a maelstrom of vivid colour and desperate noise, but Benna's focus remains unwavering as he heads into the unknown.

The screams tear through the smoke, rising above the din of battle with a chilling, visceral clarity. They pull at Benna like a current, dragging him from the chaos and thrusting him into a world where each anguished note cuts sharper than any blade.

He pushes through an archway formed by interlocking crystals, finding himself in the gardens at the rear of the Tower. The clash of Magence is muffled here, a distant heartbeat as he pauses on the intricate stone pathways. Neat hedges form a maze around him, the air heavy with the scent of earth and blossoms that catch the morning light like scattered jewels. A moment of stillness, fragile and tense, hangs over the place.

Then he sees them, and the world collapses around a single point of horror and grief. His mate lies in the center of the dew-damp grass, her body torn open and their unborn leverets scattered. Her fur is soft and still in the muted light, a stark contrast to the violent way her life has been ripped from her. His shoulders slump visibly as he approaches, each hop dragging like a stone around his neck.

He crouches beside them, his chestnut ears drooping under the weight of what cannot be undone. There is a delicateness to the scene, broken blossoms scattered like tiny, vivid corpses across the ground. Tremors run through his paws, a testament to the storm of emotions he can barely contain.

For a long moment, he is motionless, an island of sorrow in a sea of silence. His eyes are wide, and there's a softness in them—a fracture in the mask of strength he wears for the world. He bows his head, and with deliberate precision, begins to channel his Magence.

Loops of blue light form around the bodies, intricate sigils that twist and shimmer like fragments of stained glass. His breath comes in shallow, ragged bursts as the magic takes shape, each line drawn with excruciating care. The garden fades from view, and all that remains is Benna and his ethereal ritual, suspended in the weight of his loss.

The task consumes him, both balm and agony as he works. He crouches there for what seems like an eternity, infusing the air with a soft, azure glow. His blue robe pools around him, blending with the grass and blossoms in a mosaic of colour and grief. He sways slightly, as if on the verge of collapse, but his resolve holds.

With one final, trembling gesture, the sigils collapse inward. The bodies vanish, leaving behind an echo of light and the thick, choking silence of something precious torn away. He remains hunched on the ground, staring at the emptiness in front of him.

The garden is unchanged, yet everything about it is different. It stands as a testament to his loss: a once-vibrant space now haunted by memory and shadow. Benna lingers there, surrounded by scattered petals and damp earth, the world reduced to silence and the aching hollow of what once was.

Benna moves as though through a dream, each hop into the shadowed forest slow and deliberate. His breath comes evenly now, measured and calm, but the stillness belies an undercurrent of grief and uncertainty that follows him like a spectre.

He hops over gnarled roots, leaving the confines of the gardens and entering a world defined by deep shadows and soft, muted light. The trees here are ancient, their rough bark covered in thick moss and lichen, twisting into fantastical shapes that loom above him. Fallen leaves cushion his every footfall, their scent rich and earthy as he wanders deeper into the tangled wood.

The forest is a place of contrasts, both stark and subtle. Shafts of pale light pierce the dense canopy, illuminating swirling motes of dust that drift lazily through the air. A far cry from the sharp, vibrant Magence of the battlefield, or the devastating clarity of the gardens. Here, there is only quiet—the whisper of wind through branches and the distant calls of unseen birds.

Benna pauses, each breath a cloud in the chilly morning air. He stands motionless, eyes unfocused, letting the atmosphere seep into him. It is an echo of his state of mind: dim and distant, yet filled with the lingering ache of the morning's events. The forest wraps around him, a cocoon of isolation and unspoken sorrow.

As he moves again, his pace is unhurried, almost meditative. The deep green and brown of the woods blur past him, each tree and stone a silent witness to his journey. He cuts a solitary figure, a mote of blue in a world of muted tones. With every hop, he tries to leave behind the weight of his loss, but it clings to him like the persistent chill of the morning air.

He stops at the base of a massive, ancient tree, its roots sprawling across the forest floor like the limbs of some slumbering creature. The trunk rises up and disappears into the foliage above, but his attention is caught by something else—a curious, translucent form clinging to the lower boughs.

It's an egg sac, the membrane ghostly in the dim light. He tilts his head, long ears perked forward as he studies it with a mix of caution and intrigue. It sways gently in the breeze, a fragile thing that seems out of place in the hulking, primal environment. It glimmers faintly, like a beacon of uncertainty.

He stands beneath it for a moment, the stillness of the scene wrapping around him. A dozen possibilities flit through his mind, none of them certain, each as tantalising and dangerous as the last. His heart thuds in his chest, the only sign of tension in an otherwise measured demeanour.

Benna extends a steady paw, reaching out to gently pat the egg sac. He remains there, beneath the rustle of leaves and distant bird calls, a figure shrouded in the deep mystery of the woods and the even deeper mystery of what he has found.

Chapter 2

Benna crouches in the forest's shadowed embrace, where the air is thick with the scent of damp earth and the whisper of leaves. The egg sac is pulsating with a life that sets the fur on Benna's neck tingling. He narrows his eyes, the soft brown of them like old bark, and tilts his head to listen. The forest is alive with the creak of wood and the distant cry of wind, but here, it is quiet, the egg's steady throb a drumbeat of anticipation.

His breath is measured, each exhale a fog that hangs briefly in the cool air before dissolving into nothing. Leaves crunch beneath his feet as he shifts, his elongated ears twitching at the slightest rustle. The sac is a monstrosity, its surface a translucent skin stretched taut over the form within, bulging and contracting as if breathing. Benna's blue robe catches in the underbrush, the fabric a vivid splash against the muted greens and browns, but he pays it no heed, his attention fixed on the sac's ominous pulse.

A sound cuts through the stillness—a delicate crack, like the snap of a brittle twig. Benna's heart lurches. The egg's surface splits with a wet, tearing sigh, and from the wound emerges a creature of nightmare. Its body is silvery, a smooth, chitinous armor that gleams even in the dim light. Segmented antennae sway above a mouth bristling with sharp teeth, and eight long legs, ending in wicked hooks, unfurl as it frees itself from the sac's embrace.

Benna's instincts scream at him to act, to protect and destroy, to unleash the Magence that hums like a living being beneath his skin. He raises a paw, and power surges to his call, an invisible force that crackles in the air around him. But he hesitates, watching, calculating, the burden of his grief and vengeance warring with the compassion that refuses to die within him.

The creature hangs for a moment, suspended in the web of its birth, then lets go, dropping to the ground with a soft thud. It rights itself, legs moving in a sinuous rhythm, and begins to advance. Benna steadies himself, his resolve hardening like stone. The thing is an abomination, a spawn of the Sar Ala, and he must end its life before it—

It stops. Benna's breath catches in his throat. The creature fixes its eyes on him, round and segmented, a hundred reflections of his own startled gaze. Time stretches, elastic and unyielding, as they regard each other. Then, in an instant, the world shifts. The air ripples, and where the creature stood, a baby lies on the forest floor, naked and impossibly small.

Benna's Magence falters, the power slipping from his grasp like sand through fingers. A baby. A boy, with curly silver hair and eyes like molten metal, his skin unblemished and his limbs impossibly fragile. He is beautiful, as all the Sar Ala are, and utterly helpless.

Benna's heart twists, a painful, familiar ache. He cannot, will not, kill a child. The Magence that was a weapon becomes a tool of creation as he redirects its force, weaving a blanket of deep blue from nothingness to wrap the boy in warmth. He fashions a sling, cradling the tiny life against his chest, and for the first time since his family's loss, he feels a spark of purpose, a glimmer of hope.

"Elias," he whispers, the name a promise and a prayer.

The forest watches in silent witness as Benna rises, his decision made, his path irrevocably altered. He gathers his strength, the powerful muscles of his legs coiling and releasing in great, bounding strides. The trees blur past, their forms ghostly and indistinct, but he moves with a clarity of purpose that cuts through the haze of his grief.

The baby stirs against him, a soft, contented sigh, and Benna's eyes soften. He runs, the wind a cold knife that cannot touch the warmth blooming within him, and the forest echoes with the rhythm of his flight—a heartbeat, a lullaby, a new beginning.

The entrance to the crypt yawns like the mouth of a slumbering beast, cold and unwelcoming. Benna pauses at its threshold, cradling the child in the sling against his chest, the warmth of Elias' small body a comfort against the chill that emanates from within. He takes a breath, deep and steady, and steps into the underworld.

The crypt is a cathedral of stone and crystal, a vast chamber where the living meet the dead. Columns of clear quartz rise like sentinels, their surfaces catching the dim light and fracturing it into spectral hues. The walls are rough rock, unadorned and solemn, the air within as still as a held breath. Benna's footfalls echo, a soft, persistent reminder of life in a place meant for silence.

Elias stirs, a tiny movement that pulls at Benna's heart. He adjusts the sling, his touch gentle and reassuring, then continues on, his eyes scanning the shadowed recesses. He knows she will be here, waiting, and he braces himself for the encounter, for the judgment and the questions and the decision he has already made.

A tiny figure steps from the gloom, her presence a soft radiance against the stone. Leera, the Grand Mistress, the mouse Head of the Maginist Order. Her fur is white as snow, her robe a shimmer of gold that seems to breathe with its own light. She regards Benna with eyes that see more than they should, and he meets her gaze with a defiance that surprises even him.

"So this is what you bring us," she says, her voice a melody of curiosity and caution. "A child of the Sar Ala."

Benna draws himself up, the weight of his resolve a tangible thing. "His name is Elias," he replies, each word deliberate, a spell of its own. "And he is mine. My adopted son. He will choose his path when the time comes."

Leera's whiskers twitch, a subtle dance of amusement and something else—admiration, perhaps. "He could serve well in the Tower someday," she muses, the words a gentle prod, an invitation to reconsider.

"He will serve as he sees fit," Benna insists, his voice firm, a line drawn in the sand.

Leera nods, a graceful acceptance, and steps closer. "Then let us help him," she says, and there is a warmth in her tone that softens the edges of her authority.

She raises her arms, the movement fluid and serene, and the air around her shimmers with Magence. Streams of light coil and weave, a dance of creation that enfolds the child. Elias blinks up at her, unafraid, as the light touches him, altering him with a gentle but irrevocable hand. His hair darkens, the silver giving way to a rich brown, and his eyes shift from molten metal to a blue that mirrors the sky.

Benna watches, his heart a wild, confused thing in his chest. The change is profound but necessary, he knows, a way to protect the boy from what he would otherwise become. Still, the sight of it, the sudden transformation, leaves him breathless and raw.

The light fades, the Magence spent, and Leera lowers her arms. "There," she says, satisfaction and kindness twined in her voice. "A child of Denara."

In the softly lit crypt, a flutter of movement draws Benna's gaze. Parnax, the yellow butterfly Maginist, approaches with a languid grace, his wings a blur of vibrant colour. He hovers near a young woman, her form upright and her expression calm, her dress a golden echo of Leera's own. Benna recognises her—Lucy, the suppressed Sar Arsam, Leera's personal servant.

Parnax settles on Lucy's shoulder, his touch a gentle command, and channels his Magence with a whimsical flourish. Lucy's eyes widen as she feels its effect, and she reaches for the child, her arms trembling with a mix of fear and awe. Benna hesitates, then relinquishes Elias to her care, watching as she cradles the baby with a tenderness that belies her confident demeanour.

The child roots and latches, his small mouth working in a rhythm of life and need. Benna feels a pang, sharp and unexpected, and looks away, his eyes finding Leera's in the dim light.

"You have chosen a difficult path," she says, and there is no judgement in her words, only the weight of truth.

"It is the only path," Benna replies, and though his voice is steady, there is a tremor beneath it that speaks of the depth of his conviction.

Lucy finishes feeding Elias and wraps him in the blue blanket, her touch lingering as she hands him back to Benna. The child is content, his eyes heavy with the promise of sleep, and Benna holds him close, the soft warmth of him a balm against the uncertainty that lies ahead.

He nods to Leera, a silent acknowledgment, then turns and leaves the crypt. The air outside is a shock, crisp and full of life, and he breathes it in, filling his lungs with the promise of the future.

The workshop is a small, bustling hive of activity, the scent of fabric and dye a pleasant assault on the senses. Benna enters with Elias, the baby's weight a comforting presence against him, and the seamstress greets them with a wide, welcoming smile.

She is a bipedal doe, her form graceful even in the late stages of pregnancy, her hooves nimble and sure as she measures and cuts. Bolts of cloth are stacked around her, a riot of colours and textures, and she moves among them with the practised ease of one who has dedicated her life to the craft.

"These are ready," she says, gesturing to a neat pile of tiny blue tunics and trousers. Her voice is bright, a cheerful contrast to the sombre tones of the crypt. "He'll be quite the little charmer, won't he?"

Benna smiles, the expression unfamiliar but welcome, and reaches for the clothes. "He'll be whatever he chooses," he says, the words a refrain, a promise renewed with every telling.

The seamstress laughs, a lilting sound that fills the chamber, and returns to her work, her scissors flashing like silver as she snips and sews. Benna watches her for a moment, the scene a tapestry of colour and life and hope, then turns to go, the future cradled in his arms and the past a distant shadow that he is already beginning to outrun.

Chapter 3

The opulence of Benna's chambers seems to hum with Magence, every ornate detail vibrating with its own curious life. Intricately carved chests line the walls, their surfaces gleaming with golden inlay. Rich tapestries hang like captured sunsets, their vibrant hues warming the air. Amidst this splendor stands Benna, a quiet figure draped in a soft blue robe, the rich fabric echoing the chestnut of his fur. His elongated ears twitch at the sound of the wind whispering outside the chamber. Sharp yet gentle eyes rest on the infant sleeping beneath lavish embroideries. Light from a tall window filters in, casting Elias' small form in tender relief.

The cradle is a masterpiece of craftsmanship, made from the white wood of the snow tree. Elias' baby form is barely visible beneath the silken folds of his blanket, only a shock of brown curls marking his place. He lies cocooned, a serene presence in a world that is not yet his own. Suddenly, the baby's blue eyes snap open, wide with wonder.

Lucy enters the chamber as Elias disappears. An empty space hovers where he was, time holding its breath before a soft sound—a quick catch—signals his return. Lucy lunges, snatching him from the air before he reaches the floor.

She cradles him in the safety of her arms, pulling the baby close, her expression a mixture of surprise and awe. Benna's eyes widen, and for a moment the Maginist's stoic warmth softens into an almost startled affection. "How?!" His voice, normally as composed as his presence, carries a thread of disbelief.

The word floats between them as they exchange glances. Lucy, with her soft hands and kind eyes, holds Elias gently, studying the infant's face. "I cannot say," she replies, a gentle tremor of laughter weaving through her tone. Her gaze shifts back to the baby, who is wide-eyed, blue eyes like twin pools reflecting curiosity rather than fear.

Elias stares around the room, unfocused and intent, as if mapping out the unseen threads of a world only he can perceive. His small hand reaches up, grasping at the vibrant emptiness where he had hung suspended. Benna hops closer, his presence wrapping around them like a protective ward.

"He's not even a month old," Benna murmurs, his chestnut ears still twitching as if adjusting to the miracle they've just witnessed. Elias shifts in Lucy's arms, his gaze locking onto Benna. The unexpected recognition in the baby's eyes brings a softer smile to the Maginist's lips.

"He's special," Lucy answers, her voice low, as if not to disturb the delicate balance of wonder in the chamber. Her eyes meet Benna's, and a silent understanding passes between them—a mixture of hope, amazement, and a touch of something deeper, like the first breath of spring.

They watch as Elias continues his exploration of the space around him, eyes moving with uncanny focus for one so new to the world. The infant's lips part, and a small sound escapes, halfway between a coo and a sigh.

The rich colours of the room seem to gather around him like an embrace, the cradle's lush fabrics almost forgotten. Elias appears even smaller now, cradled against Lucy instead of the silken nest that Benna had so carefully prepared. His attention shifts to the vibrant weaves and patterns, the smallest crease of concentration on his smooth brow.

"We could not have expected this," Benna says, his voice carrying a melodic quality that soothes and commands the air around them. "I am amazed."

Lucy's laughter returns, soft and bright, a counterpoint to the composed wonder in Benna's voice. "As am I," she concedes, her grip on the baby gentle yet secure.

The chamber, once vast and filled with the imposing presence of the Maginist's craft, now feels smaller, a cocoon of warmth and colour that holds the three of them in its heart. They stand amidst the silence, broken only by Elias' soft breath and the distant whisper of wind against the Tower.

Elias settles against Lucy, his eyes closing as he drifts back to sleep, secure in the strange, beautiful world that is his. The chamber shifts with the rhythm of their wonder, the walls and furnishings humming with an unspoken life that mirrors the young miracle in their midst.

Like a breath held by the very walls themselves, the Great Hall gathers them all within its vast, circular heart. The chamber swells with robed figures, their eyes luminous as they rest on Elias, lying on a cushion. A pulse of energy builds. Expectation. Tension. Anticipation. Leera steps forward, a small candle flickering with life and light in her hands. She sets it gently on a low, polished table. Around her, the Maginists lean in, bright as stars in the shadowed expanse. Breathless, they watch. Waiting. Leera continues, placing the small green leaf, the cool, smooth pebble, the clear sphere of water, the dark, glossy crystal, the shining clear crystal.

The Maginists draw closer, each one alive with an eager glow, a radiant hopefulness filling the chamber like the swell of a song. They stand, ranks of them in an endless sea of shimmering robes, every hue mingling in vibrant harmony. Among them, Leera is a figure of tranquil command, her golden robe catching the light. She moves with an unhurried grace, pausing between each placement. Her movements orchestrate the suspense. One after another, she sets the objects down.

A candle, its flame a tiny, dancing spirit, as if to say, here is life, here is light, come take it if you dare.

A bright green leaf, trembling slightly as if caught in a gentle breeze. Its edges are soft and tender, curling inward, a secret ready to be whispered to the one who listens.

A smooth pebble, grey and cool, with a presence more grounded and steady than it seems, waiting with silent patience for the touch of a curious hand.

A clear sphere of water, holding the light within its round perfection. The reflections shift as Leera releases it, forming small rainbows on the polished surface of the table.

A dark, glossy crystal, an enigma wrapped in mystery, pulling the light in and bending it to its will. It waits in a quiet challenge.

And then the last—an utterly clear crystal, shining with the promise of infinite potential. It stands at the center, a luminous heart around which the other objects revolve like planets in a small, perfect universe.

They wait, an eternity in a single breath, a lifetime within a heartbeat.

Elias is still. His tiny hands rest on the polished wood of the table, hovering with innocent intent. The space around him pulses with an expectant energy, the low hum of Magence resonating through every gathered soul. Breathless, the Maginists lean in.

He reaches out, a gesture both instinctive and profound. A universe pauses. The small fingers curl, make contact, claim.

The smooth, cool pebble sits snug in his hand, the quietest of the six, a silent witness to the world-transforming choice. The stillness explodes into sound, a collective outpouring of breath and words, the chamber filling with waves of shock and surprise.

Whispers ripple like wind through the assembly, each voice adding to the gathering storm. The Prodigy. He chose. The unthinkable.

Murmurs swirl, eddying into pockets of conversation, disbelieving yet awed. Those nearest the table exchange glances, expressions ranging from astonished to intrigued to entirely dumbfounded. "It should have been Dark," a voice insists, almost pleading. Another shakes a head, eyes wide. "The dark crystal," they protest, "or none. But Earth?" Their words carry a note of wonder, a recognition that this, too, fits. That perhaps they had known all along, though it defied everything they expected.

The child holds the pebble, its matte surface unassuming among the brilliant jewels of Magence still waiting on the table. But no, he seems to say, this is mine, this is me. A small smile ghosts across his lips, a secret shared between him and the universe. The murmurs fade into an awestruck silence, leaving only the sound of breath and heartbeat and the delicate tremor of possibility.

Leera watches, an inscrutable smile playing on her lips, the wisdom of ages in her gaze. Her presence is a calming touch, a guiding hand over the chamber's restless spirit. She nods once, a motion of certainty and affirmation, and the crowd settles further into the newfound truth of this moment.

There is another silence, softer, warmer. The Prodigy has chosen. Elias remains by the table, the stone still firmly within his grasp, while the remainder of the Magence objects rest untouched. This, the pebble in his hand, is a new world for him to grow into, and he into it. The luminous eyes of the Maginists rest on him, their wonder and awe reflecting a multitude of colors, their certainty unbroken even by their surprise.

Leera steps back, her movements fluid, her voice a gentle echo in the vastness. "Earth it is," she pronounces, her tone a melody that soothes the shock and carries it to still waters.

The young child lies on his cushion, tiny and composed in the sea of gathered robes, the unassuming stone held fast in his hand. The world seems to breathe with him, all its weight and substance and beauty curling around his small form like a promise. It waits for him to claim it, but for now, the quiet victory of this moment is enough.

The air fills once more with the murmur of amazed voices, the rich sound weaving around the figures standing in vibrant formation, their surprise and acceptance leaving no space for doubt. Elias, wide-eyed and wondrous, remains at the centre, the Prodigy among them, the pebble in his hand, the world cradled within.

Colours spill across the plush rugs like a carnival of light, each shade more vibrant than the last. Toys and games lie scattered like treasures washed ashore, while shelves overflow with the bounty of books. The playchamber of the Maginist Tower is an oasis of cheerful disorder, its warmth and brightness a contrast to the solemn architecture beyond its walls. Parents line the periphery, their figures a backdrop of attentive watchers. In the middle of this joyous storm stands Elias, lean and strong, his features both familiar and strikingly out of place. Other children glance at him, some drawn by curiosity, others hesitating with the hint of instinctual fear.

Benna guides Elias towards the other children, his paw resting gently on the boy's shoulder before hopping back. The children look at Elias with eyes both wide and uncertain, their instincts mingling with curiosity. A pair of slender humanoid leopard twins with black hair, ears, and tails, sharp teeth, and clawed hands, clad in red robes and black boots, with the addition of black leggings for the boy, draws close, their green eyes narrowing. Behind them, a smaller, bipedal deer boy clad in a green robe peeks around, his gaze curious. He wobbles a bit as he approaches, an awkward grace in his youthful movement.

Other children cluster nearby, their forms a multitude of creatures, each as vibrant and diverse as the room itself. They hesitate, whispering to one another in small voices. Elias stands alone for a moment, his striking blue eyes sweeping across the room, his movements tentative yet purposeful.

Then he makes the daisy move.

The potted flower, sitting quietly near the shelf, shivers and then dances, its small blossoms swaying and twirling in midair. A burst of delight moves through the group. They gather around him, giggling and pointing, their earlier fears vanishing like morning mist. "Did you see?" one child exclaims, bright eyes wide with amazement. "He made it dance!" Their laughter fills the room, and even the cautious twins exchange a conspiratorial glance, their surprise turning into playful smiles.

Benna watches from a distance, his chestnut fur a warm presence in the corner of the chamber. His eyes follow the joyful swarm, a mix of pride and wonder reflecting in his

expression. "I told you he would be fine," a voice next to him remarks. The seamstress leans in, her eyes twinkling as she observes the playful gathering.

"I'm still not sure," another voice interjects, a note of concern threading through the words. The leopard parents, sleek and attentive, exchange a worried look. They stand close to Benna, their attention flitting between him and the unfolding scene. "The others..." The mother pauses, her gaze lingering on the children now forming a circle around Elias.

A bright vixen with fur like wildfire stands at the centre of the chamber, her grey robe softening her vividness. "All right," Yem calls out, her voice melodic yet commanding. "Let's all sit and get started with the lesson. Gather around, everyone!"

The children settle on the plush rugs, forming uneven clusters. Elias is at the centre of one, surrounded by bright faces, their eagerness palpable. A stack of paper is handed to each child, their names neatly inscribed on the corners. "Today," Yem continues, "we're drawing with Magence! I want to see what you can do. Just like the flower, let your Magence guide you."

Small hands hover over the sheets, some more certain than others. A soft hum of concentration fills the air. Elias stares at his paper, eyes narrowing as he focuses. The other children watch him, their attention a mixture of admiration and intrigue. A sudden flurry of motion catches their eyes. Lines and shapes begin to form under Elias' hand, emerging with a clarity and detail that takes their breath away.

A likeness of Benna appears, unmistakable in its precision, each feature lovingly rendered. The name "Daddy" floats above, inscribed with a tender boldness. The children gasp, their voices overlapping in a chorus of surprise. "Look what he did!" Melin, the young deer boy, exclaims, his small antlers bobbing as he peers over. His eyes are wide, reflecting both admiration and a touch of envy.

"I bet he could do all of us," Eela muses, her voice soft yet filled with challenge. She nudges the boy next to her, the one who had initially eyed Elias with distrust. Karna, the leopard twin, glances at Elias, a complex storm of emotions flickering across his face. Interest. Rivalry. A hint of envy.

The chamber swells with activity. Colours burst across the paper as drawings emerge, some tentative, others bold. Each child creates their own world, their Magence flowing with youthful excitement. Even those who had seemed fearful find their courage, joining in the vibrant chorus of creativity.

Elias' talent becomes a centre of gravity, drawing them all in. The other children press closer, their wonder growing with every passing moment. A spirit of playful rivalry fills the air, encouraging each one to reach further, try harder, explore deeper. Laughter and exclamations weave through the chamber like a joyful melody.

The parents watch from the sidelines, their expressions a tapestry of emotions. They talk among themselves, voices low yet filled with intrigue. "He's quite remarkable," one observes, unable to hide the awe. "But still... He's one of them," another counters, their voice a mixture of caution and disbelief.

Melin, with his gentle antlers and earnest eyes, lingers near Elias, his presence both comforting and curious. Eela stays close too, her feline grace and bright curiosity a constant companion. They form a triad of youthful discovery, their connections weaving together in intricate patterns.

Karna watches from a distance, his eyes a deep and contemplative green. He stands on the edge of the group, the shadows of uncertainty and competitiveness playing across his young features. But even he can't resist for long, his bond with his sister drawing him back into the fold.

The lesson continues, the children's hands moving with increasing confidence and flair. Each new creation brings a fresh wave of excitement, their playful chatter rising to a joyous crescendo. The earlier tension dissipates, leaving only the pure, unrestrained happiness of young hearts learning to trust and explore.

As the children revel in their newfound camaraderie, the parents' anxiety softens into acceptance, though threads of doubt still linger. They share glances, their concerns a silent undercurrent to the vibrant tapestry unfolding before them.

Slowly, the parents begin to drift away, their voices a gentle hum, like a distant, soothing echo. The children hardly notice, so absorbed are they in their magical world, their laughter ringing like bells in the air.

Elias sits among them, his presence no longer alien but an integral part of their shared wonder. His own happiness radiates outward, infusing the room with an irresistible joy. The Maginist children, once so unsure, now claim him as one of their own, their initial fear transformed into friendship and delight. In the playchamber of the Maginist Tower, amidst a swirl of colour and sound, Elias finds his place.

Under the wide, open sky, they gather on the hard-packed earth, a small army of young hopes and dreams. The massive frame of the Maginist Tower looms behind them, its crystalline form both refuge and challenge. A line of five-year-old Maginists assembles on a compact row of weathered wooden planks, their eyes bright with anticipation. Near them stands Darm, a towering bipedal brown bear draped in a yellow robe, his presence a study in raw strength. He waits, silent and formidable, while the young ones fidget and whisper, their excitement barely contained. A long, scarred table stretches out before them, hand-carved weapons carefully laid across its surface.

The outdoor air is crisp and fresh, carrying with it the scent of earth and possibility. The open area outside the Maginist Tower serves as their Training Ground, a vast, cleared space that invites exploration and mastery. The children's breath forms small clouds in the cool morning air, their vibrant energy like sparks waiting to ignite. The table before them holds an array of possibilities, from small wooden staves to finely polished swords, each piece a promise of potential.

Darm stands with the patience of stone, his dark eyes observing the gathered trainees. A subtle shift in his posture, a slight nod of his massive head, signals the beginning of their

initiation. The children gather closer, their gazes fixed on the array of weapons. Their voices blend in a hushed chorus, filled with the thrill of new beginnings.

Elias stands among them, a striking presence with his lean form and clear blue eyes. Next to him, Melin is animated, his graceful antlers bobbing with enthusiasm. Eela is a lithe figure, her dark hair flowing as she turns her head, green eyes gleaming. Karna stands slightly apart, his quiet demeanour masking a deeper intensity.

The anticipation is a living thing, a vibrant force that pulses through the group. Each child looks to the table, to Darm, to one another, eager to take the first step into a world of newfound skills. Darm's voice breaks the stillness, resonant and powerful. "Choose wisely. Your weapon is an extension of your spirit."

They exchange quick glances, small hands clutching at the edges of their robes. "Look at them all!" Melin whispers, his eyes wide with awe. "Which one will you choose, Elias?" The words are filled with excitement, a mirror to the boy's own burning curiosity.

Elias shrugs, a small smile playing at his lips. "I'll know when I see it."

The children move forward, their eagerness tempered by the solemnity of the moment. Darm guides each one in turn, his presence both comforting and commanding. Melin is among the first, his eyes lighting up as he reaches for a staff. His hooves close around it with confidence, a natural fit. "This one," he declares, his voice bright with certainty.

Karna's turn follows. He strides forward, forceful and determined, his movements leaving no room for doubt. He selects an axe, a weapon of power and presence, hefting it with a swift, assertive motion. A quick glance at Elias, an unspoken challenge, a flash of something deeper.

Eela approaches with feline grace, her eyes already locked on her choice. A narrow sword glistens on the table, agile and poised, a reflection of her own form. She lifts it delicately, the blade becoming a part of her, an extension of her will.

Darm watches with a quiet understanding, guiding each child to their chosen instrument. Finally, it is Elias' turn. He moves with a fluid grace, his presence commanding attention. The wooden staff seems to call to him, its simple form elegant in its purity. He reaches for it, his hand closing around the smooth wood. It is as if the staff had been waiting for him all along.

With their weapons in hand, the children gather once more. Eagerness and excitement ripple through the group, a tide of youthful ambition and promise. The urge to try, to test, to master. To become.

They begin, a flurry of movement and energy, the sound of their practise a symphony of youthful exertion. Some swing with wild abandon, others with focused precision. Their voices rise and fall, exclamations of success and determination filling the air.

Elias moves among them with an effortless grace, his staff an extension of his body. Each movement is fluid, precise, a natural dance of skill and agility. Whispers follow his motions, the other children exchanging glances, recognising the innate talent that sets him apart.

Karna watches, a flicker of envy mingling with admiration. Eela and Melin draw closer to Elias, their own efforts spurred on by his example. The weapons in their hands become more than tools; they are a reflection of who they are, who they will become.

Some succeed, some struggle, but all push forward with the exuberance of youth and the thrill of new discovery. The open sky and endless air seem to cheer them on, the vastness above echoing the boundless potential within each young heart.

They push each other, challenge each other, grow together. The landscape is alive with their presence, the voices and movements of the young Maginists a testament to the wonders that await. The thrill of rivalry, the joy of camaraderie, the awe of unleashed potential. The future stretches out before them, vast and uncharted, a wide-eyed wonder waiting to be claimed.

The sky above is a smooth, expansive blue, broken only by the arch of the nearby cliff. They come to this high, airy place as if drawn by the wind, guided by the currents of Magence. The Howls gather, creatures with the bodies of horses and the heads and wings of owls, a herd of welcome and belonging. The colours of their bright plumage gleam in the sun, while Benna and Elias approach with careful deliberation. One Howl stands taller than the rest, Lord Loka's eyes dark and intent as he greets them. "You honour us with your visit," he rumbles, his voice a deep and rolling thunder.

Seven-year-old Elias moves slowly, drawn forward by the vivid hues and striking forms of the assembled herd. There is no hesitation in his step, only a quiet fascination and the warmth of anticipation. Beside him, Benna's lean figure contrasts with the broad expanse of the open sky. His chestnut fur and blue robe are set ablaze by the sun, mirroring the bright plumage of their hosts.

Lord Loka steps forward, his snow-white plumage dotted with black spots that glisten like obsidian. The intensity of his eyes softens as they rest on the visitors. Around him, the other Howls gather in a vibrant arc, their feathers a riot of colour. The air itself seems to shimmer with welcome.

"We have brought the winds of the east with us," Benna replies, a lightness in his voice matching the brightness of the day.

Lady Shayli, Loka's mate, stands close, her grey features soft and deliberate. Her condition is clear, rounded belly and serene gaze marking her as visibly pregnant. Elias' attention is immediately drawn to her. His blue eyes fix on the gentle curve of her midsection, a profound curiosity taking hold of him.

"This one knows," Shayli observes, a touch of amusement colouring her soft voice. Her eyes meet Elias', holding them with a calm certainty. There is no fear, only a quiet acceptance that extends to the rest of the herd.

Other Howls share her glance, looking from her belly to Elias, understanding the connection. A smaller Howl with sleek brown feathers lets out a trill of laughter. "Just like Loka!" she exclaims, her words a musical ripple through the air.

Elias steps closer, mesmerised by the unspoken language between Shayli and the unborn life she carries. He seems to forget everything else, entranced by the gentle rise and fall of her breath.

Benna watches, his presence relaxed and trusting. He knows the depth of the Howls' understanding, the strength of their acceptance. It is a rare gift, one that others have struggled to offer Elias.

"You have no fear," Benna remarks, his voice carrying both relief and gratitude.

Lord Loka laughs, the sound a booming resonance that echoes against the cliffside. "Should we?" he counters, his tone both teasing and profoundly serious.

"No," Benna answers, his smile a reflection of the sunlit joy surrounding them.

Elias lingers by Shayli, his intense focus an unspoken dialogue between him and the growing life inside her. Her gaze remains steady, unperturbed by the closeness, even welcoming it. "He is one of us," she declares, a conviction that leaves no room for doubt. She lowers her head, nuzzling the boy's cheek with an affectionate gesture that only deepens his fascination.

The Howls echo her confidence, their colourful forms a living testament to the harmony and freedom they cherish. They move around Elias, each one acknowledging his presence, recognising him in a way that transcends mere understanding. The child of promise, a part of their world.

The day unfolds with the lightness of a spring breeze, the openness of sky and heart. Elias and Benna spend their time with the herd, embraced by the vibrant community. Shayli's gentle condition becomes a focal point, a symbol of life and renewal that mirrors Elias' own journey.

They share laughter and insights, the rolling voices of the Howls weaving stories of earth and sky, wind and freedom. "Sar Arsam," Loka teases, nudging Elias with playful familiarity. "Do you hear the call of the wind?" The young boy nods, his eyes wide and bright, his heart swelling with the boundless possibilities.

There is a fluid, airy quality to the visit, as if the entire world is a single, endless breath of wonder. The Howls speak of their hopes, their joys, the continuity of life that Shayli carries within her. The words swirl around Elias and Benna, enfolding them in a cocoon of belonging.

The sun begins its descent, casting long, golden shadows across the wide plateau. Elias remains at the heart of the gathering, his own spirit lifted by the absence of fear, the presence of love and trust. He is among friends, embraced by their certainty, recognised for who he is and will become.

As the day comes to a gentle close, Elias and Benna prepare to return to the Tower. Their steps are unhurried, reluctant to leave the airy openness that has become their refuge, their joy. They share a glance, an unspoken recognition of the rare and beautiful connection they have found.

"Anytime," Lord Loka calls after them, his voice a distant thunder on the breeze.

Benna turns, the wind catching the folds of his robe. "Soon," he promises, the word lingering in the air as they make their way back.

The Howls remain, a colourful silhouette against the vast sky. They watch the two figures disappear into the distance, their confidence in the young child as bright and unwavering as the sun above.