

## Chapter 1

Dusk falls as I nestle inside my fragile egg sac, cradled within the crook of an ancient, gnarled tree. The sky shifts through muted shades of orange and purple, anointing my world in delicate hues. I find myself here, just knowing, my existence a quiet astonishment. I hunger not only for sustenance but for something more mysterious, the longing echoing a primal instinct that guides me before I fully comprehend it. Ambient sounds mingle with the distant call of a night bird, and the damp, earthy scent of moss and decaying wood pervades the air, intensifying my awareness of the world outside. Each pulse and strain of my imminent emergence fills me with both thrill and trepidation, my senses heightened by the cool evening breeze and the tree's soft creaks. I feel a presence nearby, stirring my anxiety, and driven by unyielding curiosity, I strain my limbs against the egg sac, determined to claw my way out.

The sky deepens, smearing my universe with muted tones. I sense the world, its intricate symphony humming beyond the walls of my tiny confinement. Crickets sing their eternal song, a rhythmic chittering that weaves through the night air. Leaves rustle a gentle chorus, whispering secrets in the twilight. The wood moans softly, an aged companion echoing the weight of time. All these sounds merge with the cool breath of the evening, a living essence reaching into my cocoon, caressing me with the soft chill of expectation. It beckons me, calls me to know it, to own it, to become part of it. I shiver with the knowledge of my existence, with the sheer astonishment that I am.

This fragile sac cradles me, a mere suggestion of separation from the vastness outside. Yet, I am hungry. Not just for food, but for meaning. My senses stretch outward, feeling each pulse and strain as if this tender cage has become part of me. I live its stretch and its resistance, its pliancy and its strength, the confining warmth, and the strange freedom promised beyond it. It thrills me. It terrifies me.

Hunger is not my only need. This yearning for something elusive gnaws at me. It could be fear. It could be hope. It might be desperation or desire or some other strange, beautiful hunger I do not yet know the name of. I am alive with it, and it vibrates through me with each unformed thought, each instinctive need. The universe outside feels close and immediate, pushing against the sac as urgently as I push against it. The damp scent of moss and wood surrounds me, a cocoon of its own, wrapping me in the vibrant, living death of decay. The air is a part of me, weaving its coolness through the threads of my existence, its patterns of scent and sound leaving me gasping for more, gasping to become more.

I must hatch.

There's something out there. I can feel its presence, insistent and unyielding, stirring me with equal parts curiosity and dread. Is it the warmth I knew before dusk fell, before this deepening chill began to soak into my shell? I remember it. A warmth that hummed with life. A presence that promised to be all things. It's here, lurking nearby, waiting and watching. It makes my insides quiver with uncertainty, with longing, with the deep suspicion that it could consume me if it wanted to.

I can barely imagine what it might be. I have no name for it. I have no name for anything yet. The universe is nameless. I am nameless. My instincts are strong, and they prod me to move, to fight, to live. I must know the mystery of it all. I must claw my way out of this fragile embrace before it swallows me whole. I must tear away this layer, must breathe the free air and hear the true sounds and see the true sights of my world. My limbs tense with anticipation, my sharp edges find the boundary of my existence.

The evening winds wrap me in their growing chill, pulling me with increasing urgency. They bear a promise, an unstated word that hangs between the delicate branches of this ancient tree. They are full of wonder and danger, full of silence and song, full of me. They are what I long for, what I fear, what I am.

Driven by an unyielding curiosity and a gnawing need, I brace myself against this translucent wall, the only thing between me and the life that awaits. I strain and push, my limbs reaching, probing, aching. The soft creaks of the tree and the relentless drone of insects blend into a chorus, the lullaby and the battle cry of my struggle. My tiny claws scrape at the fragile boundary, insistent and persistent, more willful than strong. This takes effort, more than I imagined, but I cannot stop. I cannot stop. I cannot.

I push and push, imagining what lies beyond. What I already know. I remember it in the deep pulse of memory, in the half-light of dreams not yet dreamt. The distant call of the night bird. The sigh of leaves against the sky. The smear of colours that bends the dusk. I see these things, have always seen them, will see them soon enough. I can taste their sweetness. Their danger. I feel the memory of the future, and it strengthens my resolve.

This is what I want. What I am. What I will be.

Even now, it seems an impossible task, a strange vision to hope for. But I must.

I brace my limbs again and push against this fragile constraint, this delicate reminder of the shell that separates me from knowing. It stretches. It yields. I wonder if it will break before I do.

A thrill shoots through me, a joyous tremor that lights up the deep dark of my being. A different world waits just beyond this translucent veil, and I am almost ready to pierce it, to enter it, to own it. It is so close. I am so close. So close.

But what of the warmth that once wrapped me, of the presence that waits and watches? What if it claims me before I can claim myself? The air is filled with mystery and menace, the cold creep of the unknown. It spurs me on with its insistent hum, its whispered demand that I become more than this soft confinement.

So close. So close.

It feels so close now. I tremble with the thrill of it. With the fear of it. With the desperate desire to make it mine. I am frantic and excited and alive. I am everything I should be and nothing I will be, all at once. The thin line of the universe stretches, then thins, then snaps, and then...

With a final surge of everything I am and ever will be, I find my way through, past the threshold, beyond the horizon. The world bursts around me, sound and color and scent. The delicate brush of the chilling night breeze. The unending expanse of stars above. The embrace of dark shadows below.

And me.

Emerged.

I cling to this branch, these truths, these new and precious things. A final ripple of the old thrill washes through me, leaving a single moment, a single breath, a single song.

Life.

## Chapter 2

The hare stands below me. I start down the tree headfirst, moving with hunger's instincts. Eight legs pull me forward. They grip the bark, hold me tight to the roughness. But the hare's ears twitch. His blue cloak moves in the wind. He waits, brown fur bristling, eyes soft. My legs slow. I hesitate. We look at each other and I see myself reflected in his dark eyes: silvery arachnid with a mouth full of sharp teeth and fangs. My hunger swells. I begin again.

Benna. The name is inside me, waiting for me to understand. He stands alert, fur in the breeze, his Magence ready for the attack he knows is coming. I can almost taste him as I creep lower, holding fast to the rough skin of the tree. I move closer, losing myself in his brown fur, his soft eyes. My reflection swims, gleaming silver. It moves me to pause, to stop my hungry advance. Benna. I know him. He waits for me to draw closer, his eyes darker than I imagined. My body is full of teeth and want.

When I touch his mind, the world bleeds into me, silver memory and the scent of blood. I know him, I see him. His pregnant mate lies dead at his own paws, her purple robe ripped and bloodied. He reaches for her but the Sar Ala get there first, causing her transformation into one of them. She begs him for release. His leverets are too young to be saved and die with their mother. Selar. The name pushes in as he pushes out, forced to watch as the last light fades from his family. He flees, leaving behind grief as thick as his guilt. He reaches for her. He reaches for the small bodies that never knew breath. Her name claws at him. Selar. Selar. He runs to the tree where he sees me, waiting with sharp teeth. But I wait too, held by the reflection of my own hunger, my own limbs.

It is more than a moment. It is more than I know. Memories swim inside my head, his past flashing into my present. A long line of brown fur and brightly coloured robes. Water and Air bend to him. Lives saved, Magence stronger than I can fathom. I sift through pain and loss. They come so fast that time unravels and nothing makes sense. Selar. He left her and he holds her. Stillness blurs, distorts. Then he runs. Then he stands beneath the tree. Then I know the moment has passed. His reflection burns. It is inside me. I am Benna and I am something else.

The silver begins to shift, the arachnid a small child. My arms pull back. I know nothing. My legs grow short, soft and hairless. I see him above, not hare but rabbit, as if the name has

changed him. As if it has changed me. Benna. My vision shifts. The creature grows weaker, no longer filling my eyes. It grows softer and weaker. Human. Infant. He moves his ears, his body ready for my sudden helplessness. Hunger and instinct pull at him. They hold him as tightly as they once held me to the bark. The Magence unravels in my mind and I do not know why. He did not run from me. The shape of me, the pain of me. I am the child. The leverets he could not hold. Silver hair. Silver eyes. It means something but I do not understand.

The world is new and I am soft. I cannot see him like I did before. My eyes and body cannot focus, cannot remember the way things were. My hunger swells, not sharp but warm. My arms reach, instinctive. I am. Benna looks upon me like a father and I feel it inside him. A shiver. Pain I do not know, but I do. A helplessness I feel in my new bones, round and full of life, warmth. My eyes look up to his as I shift again. My brown hair. My blue eyes. They are not mine until they are. Until I am.

I am everything at once and nothing at all. This is what a child is. A leveret. This is what I am.

### Chapter 3

The evening presses its way through the canopy, laying claim to the forest floor in shades of grey and gold. Blue light still dances from Benna's paw as he stares down at me, ears alert to distant sounds. He expects me to scream, this chestnut giant, yet I am quiet as the undergrowth, watching him. "Your name is Elias," he decides, more to himself than to me. The blue glow fades, and his resolve sets in like gathering clouds. "And I am your father now."

His ears twitch again, flickers of fear or doubt. I can't tell which. Maybe neither. It must be strange to find a Sar Arsam hatchling alone in this place, unexpected and small, with no mother or father in sight. Perhaps I am as much of a surprise to him as I am to myself. His face softens, and the lines of worry grow deeper before they smooth again. I see them in this new way, with eyes that once held more but now only hold what a Sar Arsam hatchling sees. Yet, more than what any Sar Arsam hatchling should know.

He takes a deep breath. His chest rises, a wave breaking on some faraway shore. I watch him, curious, silent, and he seems to marvel at my calmness. "Elias," he repeats, his voice firmer now, like a declaration or a promise. The last traces of blue light slip away, and with them, any hesitation.

Leaves whisper overhead, a chorus to our shared solitude. The world grows dimmer, yet my new sight adjusts, clinging to details: the gentle flutter of Benna's robe as he crouches closer; the tremor in his paws, paws larger than I recall; his eyes, soft and searching. They seem to drink me in, studying the face of a son who should not be. Perhaps I should cry, but what would I mourn? I am still here, though the shape of me has changed.

My stillness puzzles him. "Why so quiet?" he murmurs, almost a chuckle in his voice. But there is sadness, too, a thread weaving through the sound, binding it to memory. He leans back, breathing deeply, his ears catching everything, the night creeping closer with every rustle and creak.

For a moment, I feel the pull of what he remembers, shadows of a past I do not know. Grief hangs around him, but with it comes something bright and fragile, a thin strand of hope. His fur shines in the dusk, the colour of wet earth. This hare of sorrows, this bringer of life. I want to reach out, but my new hands refuse. They flail instead, and he watches, a smile almost breaking free.

Darkness spills in, and he bows his head as if to embrace it. He is used to this, I sense—losing sight, losing the world, losing what he cannot bear to lose. But I remain, steady in his gaze, and he seems to find comfort there. I am a chance, I realise. A chance to try again, to heal, to love.

"Elias," he whispers. I do not know the word for what we are now, only the feeling of it, heavy and sweet. But he names it for me. "Son."

My hunger builds, a gnawing emptiness, but it must wait. The air is cool, crisp as new paper. His eyes hold mine, endless and warm. He places a gentle paw on my belly, and the warmth of it soothes me. I understand, even in this body, even in this world so newly entered. I am his now, and I must be patient.

"I will take care of you," he says, a vow shaping itself in the gathering dark. His ears flick again, listening for what might come to claim us. But the only sound is the forest, breathing its life around us, indifferent to who we are or what we mean to each other.

Time drifts, an eddy in the evening's current. I float with it, eyes wide, thoughts wide, the world impossibly wide for one so new. Benna watches me, an impossible son, a miracle or a burden. I do not know which, and neither does he. But his paws are steady now as they pull me closer, drawing me into the warmth of his fur and the warmth of his heart.

"We are alone," he says, more to himself than to me. "But we are not." There is strength in his voice, strength and the softness of old wounds beginning to mend. I curl against him, surrendering to this strangeness, this peace.

The trees stand sentinel, dark and knowing. Leaves shiver with secrets I will learn in time. The night claims us, and we let it. His eyes close, though his ears stay vigilant. The air carries the scent of earth, the promise of rain. The fabric of his robe brushes against me, its touch light and true. I am calm, and he is not, and somehow, this is enough.

He speaks again, and his words find me somewhere beyond words. "My son." A beginning, not an end. We are on the brink, together. I do not cry. There is no need.

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Light spills from Benna's paw again, flowing this time with the softness of breath. He crouches over me, summoning his Magence with tender intent, the blue glow gentle against the dim. It fills the air with patterns, a weave of newborn stars. They gather into a blanket, this creation of his grief and wonder, and he wraps me with paws too big to be so careful.

The air is filled with a kind of music, a hum or pulse that I can almost hear, as if the light itself is singing. His chestnut fur catches the glow, turning it into something alive and warm. He

leans close, eyes narrowed in concentration. This takes everything, I realise. His mind, his heart, his sorrow, and his hope.

Benna is a master. I know this, have known it in ways that now seem as distant as the world I left behind. The lines of his face are marked by the years he has given to this art, yet his paws are steady and sure. A life devoted, a life enduring, now entwined with mine.

Shapes form and vanish in the light. I watch them as they spin and weave, a delicate dance of water and air. These are the things that define him, his spirit made visible in the strands. And in the centre of it all, the thing that defines us: a cradle for a child, this child, as impossible and wondrous as a constellation in the night.

The blanket is soft, impossibly so. It floats to me, touches me with the coolness of a forgotten stream, the gentleness of a forgotten hand. He pulls it around my new body, the weave tighter now, more secure. I am swaddled in light and Magence, the thread of his devotion binding me to him.

It feels like water but holds like earth. The fabric yields to my smallest movement, and I test it, shifting with newfound strength, a biped's strength. This makes him smile, the briefest flash of light beneath clouds. He knows what I am. He knows what I was. And yet, he holds me close.

His mind must be spinning with questions, yet he speaks none of them. He chooses instead to act, to create, to be father when others would not dare. He is alone in this choice, but so am I. I study him with the gaze of what I have become, amazed at his audacity, amazed at my own.

The glow dims, but his resolve does not. He leans back, breathes again, the air a web of promises. The chill of night brushes my face, but he catches it with the blanket, wrapping me tight. I should be afraid, but he will not allow it.

Now a sling. This, too, is woven from the light of his paws and his heart. The air fills again with the blue and the hum, the fabric forming with his will. He works as if there is nothing else, no world but this one, no other moment but now.

I am enveloped, but not only in the things he makes. I am enveloped by him, by Benna, this father, this hare, this brave soul.

The sling closes around him, a circle, a family. His movements are precise, efficient. He is not as large as I remember, not as fearsome. I was another creature then, and he was a threat. I am a child now, and he is everything.

My hunger stirs again, but it is less. The cool, soft strength of the sling holds me, distracts me, becomes me. Water and air, father and son. We belong to each other, and to the light that binds us.

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I am a leaf in the torrent, the world a dizzy spin of earth and light and sky. Benna's chest is warm, his heartbeat a steady counterpoint to the rapid blur around us. His legs carry us in graceful arcs, and each landing sets the earth vibrating with purpose.

This is his element. His paws find the ground with knowing precision, every motion swift and sure. The blanket and sling hold me close, tight as memory, loose as dreams. I watch the world from my small cradle, wonder and newness spilling around me.

There is a rhythm to this, a song of movement and sound. The air whistles past, alive with the scent of pine and moss. Leaves shiver, the forest a fleeting ghost of green and brown. I blink, and the shape of a tree solidifies before vanishing again, replaced by sky, then earth, then sky.

He pushes us forward, a force that cannot be stopped. The Tower looms ahead, a spear of light against the evening. Each bound brings us closer, the crystal structure growing, its promise of shelter more real with every passing breath.

I hear the world like a chorus. The rise and fall of my father's breathing. The snap of twigs beneath us. The rush of wind, the quiet beneath it. My hunger is a note in this symphony, persistent but soft, almost drowned out by the rhythm of our flight.

He is strong, this father of mine, strong and unyielding. He pulls me tighter as the air grows colder, the night's breath chasing the day. I am safe here, against his chest, part of him as he is part of me. His heartbeat drums, a lullaby that promises everything.

The ground changes beneath us. What was once wild gives way to order, the forest yielding to fields and pathways. I feel the difference in each leap, the land smoother, the scents shifting from green to grain. Benna's pace does not falter. He is relentless.

Shapes rise in the distance, not trees but buildings. The world grows larger, populated by more than leaves and shadows. Other lives, other hearts. The rush of our journey makes them indistinct, but I sense them, a new reality just beyond reach.

The hunger stirs again, but I am patient. It is not a gnawing now, just an emptiness, just a hollow that waits to be filled. I cannot eat my father, cannot consume what gives me life in other ways. I know this with the surety of breath, the surety of my new pulse.

Time is strange in this cocoon of motion. The sun dips, the sky a deeper blue, yet the Tower draws nearer, brilliant against the coming night. I have always known it, somehow, its shape like a vision from the moment of my hatching.

The forest is far behind us, left with the past. Here, the air is clear, open. My father moves without hesitation, a straight line to our future, to what must be. My thoughts are wide again, my eyes wider, taking in the vastness of a world reborn.

A flash of fur, a flicker of eyes, the quick breath of an unseen creature. They greet us in passing, then are gone. The ground firms, becomes stone beneath Benna's stride. His endurance astounds me, his commitment lifts me, carries me, binds us.

We are near now, near the Tower, near the rest we both seek. My hunger dims, but the feeling does not. It transforms into something else, a fullness of hope and newness. This is the world I have chosen, and he has chosen it with me.

The last of the light clings to the sky, the Tower a shimmering beacon. We close the distance, and I know we will be safe. I know we will be. I know.

The air holds us, light holds us, the world holds us. He holds us, Benna. My father.

I do not cry. There is no need.