

Elias:
Monster and Maginist



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Chapter 1

The golden sun gracefully dips below the horizon, painting the sky in a soft, ethereal purple glow, as I find myself enveloped within the delicate embrace of my egg sac. It is nestled securely in the crook of a sturdy tree, its rough, textured bark providing a comforting cradle for my fragile existence. The world outside is a mesmerising tapestry of deepening shadows and hushed whispers, as the evening breeze stirs the leaves into a gentle rustling, creating a soothing symphony that lulls me into a serene tranquility.

Within this cocoon, I am on the cusp of hatching, an instinctive knowledge that pulses through me with undeniable certainty, though the source of this awareness eludes me. A persistent, gnawing hunger accompanies this anticipation, a deep, primal craving that intensifies with each passing heartbeat, urging me to venture into the unknown.

In the midst of this anticipation, I sense a presence nearby, a faint warmth permeating the air that stirs me into action. With a surge of instinctive urgency, I begin to claw my way out of the confining egg sac. My tiny, determined limbs push and scratch against the delicate membrane, each movement driven by an insatiable drive to emerge into the world beyond. The sac quivers around me, yielding to my relentless efforts as I break through the thin, translucent barrier that has encased me for so long. Light filters in, a soft, inviting glow that beckons me forwards, and with one final, determined push, I free myself, inhaling the crisp, fresh air for the very first time.

Chapter 2

I spot a hare dressed in a flowing blue robe, its fabric fluttering gently in the soft, whispering breeze. The robe billows around him like a serene ocean wave, its deep azure hues contrasting vividly with the surrounding greenery. Intrigued by the unusual sight, I begin my descent from the tree, manoeuvring deftly among the dense, intertwining branches. I move headfirst, my limbs expertly navigating the natural labyrinth, carefully balancing and gripping the rough, textured bark. I can feel the grainy surface beneath my claws as I make my way down towards the ground, my senses alive with the earthy scent of the forest.

As I approach the hare, my eyes lock onto him with a ravenous intensity, like a predator sizing up its prey. He stands poised, his Magence ready, a symbol of power and resilience glinting in the dappled sunlight. His fur bristles in the

wind, each hair standing on end as if charged with the energy of the moment, and his ears twitch alertly, finely attuned to the tension crackling in the air. The anticipation hangs between us, thick and palpable, like a storm about to break, each of us acutely aware of the other's intent.

I halt in my tracks and gaze up at him, my eyes meeting his in a silent, unspoken challenge. In the depths of his gaze, I catch a glimpse of my own reflection, a mirrored image captured in a tranquil pond, revealing a momentary connection between us that transcends words.

Then, with an instinctive dive into his mind, I absorb the essence of his identity—his name is Benna—and unravel the intricate threads of his past. Memories unfold before me, vivid and poignant as a painted tapestry, revealing the heart-wrenching loss of his pregnant Ama, Selar. Selar, like him, was a hare Maginist, her presence always marked by the graceful flow of a purple robe that seemed to dance with her every movement. The tragedy is raw and fresh, her image seared into his consciousness as she lay at his paws, the life within her—several unborn leverets—extinguished too soon. She had been attacked by a Sar Arsam, a fearsome creature of nightmares, and as her body began the dreadful transformation, she pleaded with him to end her suffering. These desperate moments, just minutes old, echo painfully through his mind like an unhealed wound.

For reasons unknown to me, I instinctively morph into an infant boy, my form shifting seamlessly until soft, curly silver hair adorns my head, glistening like moonlight in the dim forest light. My eyes, too, take on the same striking metallic hue, reflecting the ethereal glow of the moon above.

I gaze at Benna once more, taking in the rich, earthy brown of his fur, like fertile soil, and the deep, calming blue of his robe, reminiscent of a serene lake. As I do, my own hair transforms into a warm chestnut hue, and my eyes shift to a striking shade of azure, mirroring the vibrant colours I see before me, as if trying to forge a deeper bond with the world around us.

Chapter 3

Benna waves his paw with an elegant flourish, and in an instant, the shimmering aura of his Magence dissipates like a burst of glittering stardust, leaving only the subtle hum of its lingering power vibrating in the air around us. His gaze is intense, penetrating, as if he can see into the depths of my soul. His voice, steady and gentle, resonates with authority as he proclaims, "Your name is Elias, and from this moment on, I am your father." His words

are imbued with a solemn promise, wrapping around me like a cloak, providing a profound sense of identity and belonging.

With mastery over his Magence, he conjures a radiant, shimmering blue blanket that enfolds me in a cocoon of warmth and comfort. His movements are precise and skilled as he crafts a matching blue sling, securing me tenderly within its soft confines. With a graceful and powerful leap, he carries me effortlessly, bounding across the rolling landscape towards the distant silhouette of the Maginist Tower, a beacon on the horizon.

The persistent gnawing hunger within me is like an insistent drumbeat, a deep ache that demands attention and refuses to be ignored. Yet, despite its intensity, I find myself incapable of quelling it by consuming my new father. Instead, I exercise a profound restraint, choosing to bide my time with quiet patience.

Chapter 4

My father carries me down a narrow stone stair, each step echoing in the cold hush of the crypt. Flickering torchlight dances along moss-flecked walls, casting spindly shadows that writhe like silent spectres. The air is heavy with the musk of antiquity—damp earth, aged incense, and the faint metallic tang of old tears. As we descend into the heart of this underground sanctuary, I sense the weight of generations pressing in around us. He has come to show me his lost Ama and the fragile spirits of the leverets who never drew their first breath—a cluster of tiny, curled forms cradled in sorrow. The atmosphere thrums with memory: sorrow, devotion, and love tightly wound together like the roots of an ancient tree.

At the centre of the chamber stands a grand, horizontal crystal sarcophagus, its facets polished to a liquid sheen. Pale torchlight splinters against its surface, scattering rainbows across the vaulted ceiling. Within, Selar lies in perfect stillness, her delicate features framed by the crystal's gentle glow. She is still swollen with the new lives that had barely begun before they were taken. The crystal hums with an otherworldly resonance, a silent lullaby that holds its occupants in an ageless embrace, blurring the boundary between waking and dreaming.

I reach out with my mind, probing the silent fortress of their thoughts, but encounter only endless emptiness—vast plains of quiet that stretch on without a single echo of emotion. It is as if time itself has drained the well of their consciousness, leaving behind a serene, unbroken stillness.

A figure slips into view at the far end of the crypt: a white mouse garbed in a robe of spun gold, each thread catching the torchlight in a soft, luminous shimmer. She moves with graceful purpose, hands and feet soundless on the cold stone. At her approach, a familiar tingling washes over me. My body elongates; carapace and joint unfurl into the sleek, many-legged form of my arachnid self. My legs clatter eagerly across the stone as I lunge towards her, driven by an ancient hunger. In that instant, my father's broad silhouette blocks my path. His eyes, half stern, half pleading, meet mine as he intones, "No, little one. Leera is my friend and our leader."

I withdraw my straining senses from the empty crypt and thread them into Leera's mind, slipping between woven strands of her memories. I ride currents of laughter that dance like sunbeams across a meadow, sift through the soft ache of her grief, and taste the bitter sweetness of dreams long abandoned. Each recollection unravels like gilded thread, combining the vibrant reds of her joy, the deep indigos of her sorrow, and the pale gold of her hope.

Having sated my curiosity, I turn to the chamber floor in search of sustenance. My multifaceted eyes scan the floor and settle on a fat, writhing worm, its slick body glistening with earth and dew. I seize it—its warm flesh yielding beneath my fangs—and savour its rich, organic tang. As I feed, renewed vigour pulses through my limbs, and I set about seeking more morsels: crunchy beetles with iridescent shells, succulent larvae tucked beneath cracks in the stone. Each bite echoes like soft percussion in the hush of the crypt, harmonising with the low murmur of my father and Leera as they talk.

"Benna, many of our people will hate or fear him," Leera's voice drifts through the air, gentle as a breeze stirring autumn leaves.

"They must learn," my father replies, his tone firm, resolute. "My decision stands."

Leera's words come again, tempered with care: "You have my support, but not all will follow. He cannot replace what you lost."

A shadow passes over my father's face. "I know," he says softly, pain threading his voice. "But I could neither kill him nor abandon him."

Their exchange hangs between them like the cool weight of the vaulted ceiling. A beat of silence, and then Leera's voice wavers: "There is darkness in his nature, Benna. He may disappoint your hopes."

“And there is light,” my father insists, voice steady as a vow. “I believe in him. I must.”

When at last my hunger is sated and the final beetle shell crumbles between my teeth, I feel the pull to return to my beginning. I slip from arachnid back into the soft warmth of infancy, curling within my cradle-like sling. Limbs fold in gentle arcs, eyes close, and I drift into peaceful repose, carried by the echoes of love and loss that linger in the crypt’s still air.

Chapter 5

After bidding farewell to Leera, my father carries me up a flight of stairs and along a corridor to the seamstress’ workshop. The air here is rich with the heady perfume of cotton and silk, mingled with the faint tang of beeswax from her carefully polished worktable. Sunlight filters through a narrow window, falling in golden bars across piles of cloth—emerald velvets, rose-petal silks, storm-grey linens—each bolt stacked like the spines of a living rainbow. Spools of thread in every hue imaginable perch on shelves, their glossy strands catching the light like jewels. As we step inside, the bipan doe at her workbench pauses, needle suspended in mid-air. Her rounded belly, heavy with life, curves beneath her fine green robe. My father introduces her to me as Talla.

My father’s voice, always warm and steady, carries his request: garments tailored to my size, sturdy yet graceful. He bows his head respectfully. The seamstress’ large, brown eyes flick from his face to me. Surprise flickers there, delicate as a moth’s wing, yet no hint of fear. In that quiet glance, I sense a mother’s empathy—her silent solidarity with the weight of my father’s choice, the love and responsibility woven into each stitch he commissions.

She smiles then, nods, and sets down her stitching. With deft hooves she measures my small frame—arch of shoulder to hip, length of thigh to ankle—marking lines on ivory satin with charcoal, her hooves as precise as a composer’s. She selects a fabric the colour of a midnight pond under a new moon: deep sapphire blue alive with faint silver threads that catch the light like starlight drifting across water. She cuts it into panels that flap softly like wings, then sews them together into a flowing robe, its drape reminiscent of liquid sky. For leggings, she chooses a stretch of matching silk-jersey, snug at the waist and tapering to the ankles, seams hidden in slender, silver-stitched lines. Each piece she lays before me, brushing away errant threads with maternal tenderness.

My father carries me next to his opulent chambers, where the scent of aged oak and well-oiled leather lingers beneath the arches of smooth crystal. Tapestries of royal blue and gold hang on the walls, depicting scenes of harvest and hearth, and a thick, woven rug cushions every footstep with muted whispers. In the centre stands a low divan of burgundy leather, its cushions tufted and soft. He places me down and begins the gentle ritual of dressing. First the deep-blue leggings, their fabric cool and smooth as polished river pebbles. Then the robe, which he slips over my head and adjusts at the shoulders, smoothing the collar so it lies flat against my neck. His paws, warm and reassuring, press each seam into place, removing every wrinkle with tender care.

I feel the shimmer of silk against my skin, the slight weight of fine cloth hugging me like a guardian's embrace. My father's focused expression—eyebrows knit, lips curved into a small, proud smile—speaks of love and devotion far beyond words.

A wide yawn escapes me. He notices at once, and with a soft chuckle lifts me back into the sling, holding me snug against his chest. We cross the hall to a smaller chamber, once prepared for his unborn leverets. Now it glows with tender warmth: wall sconces of amber glass cast pools of light that dance on the crystal surfaces, soft as candlelit dawn.

In the centre sits a cradle crafted from pale birch, its spindles carved into the shapes of curled vines. The wood's grain gleams like polished pearl. Inside, blankets of pale moss green—stitched with tiny flowers—lie folded into soft piles. He lays me down, tucking me in beneath those blankets, their down filling a gentle nest around me. He nudges the cradle; it rocks in a slow, perfect arc, the hinges whispering a lullaby only the night can know. With a wave of his paw the light fades away to nothing.

I drift, eyes half-closed, to the steady sound of my father settling on the softly woven rug beside the cradle. His fur-brushed flank forms a dark silhouette against the warm glow of starlight peeking through the window, and each breath he takes rises and falls like the tide. The rug fibres rustle softly beneath him, a hushed accompaniment to his deep, rhythmic breathing. In that quiet cocoon of light, wood, and fabric, my lids grow heavy, and I slip into sleep wrapped in safety and warmth.

I jolt awake as if struck by lightning, a raw surge of power crackling through every fibre of my being. My skin prickles with heat, each nerve ending alive with anticipation. Muscles spool and lengthen, bones sliding into new alignments with soft, grinding protests, a dull ache throbbing behind each movement. It feels as though every dormant cell has been set ablaze, humming and vibrating in a symphony of metamorphosis that both thrills and overwhelms me.

In an instant, my growth accelerates beyond all reason. My limbs stretch and broaden, my chest thrusts outward, and the cradle beneath me shatters in a thunderous cacophony. Splinters fly like projectiles, and torn swaths of fabric drift to the floor as the lovingly crafted wood fractures into jagged shards under the force of my transformation.

Moments later, I stand eight feet tall, colossal and looming above the ruins of my former self. The entity that has arisen within me takes command, relegating my own will to a silent observer. I watch, powerless, as this creature seizes my father with its razor-edged claws, taking him by the ears and dragging him towards its gaping, drooling maw. Its eyes burn with feral hunger, and the air itself vibrates with the guttural rumble of its predatory growl. Every calculated motion drips with malevolence, as though it savours the terror it inflicts.

I tear a word from my throat—Stop!—but it vanishes into the void between us. In that charged stillness, my father opens his mind to the beast, laying bare the memory of my adoption, the secret bond that formed between us. I clutch that recollection like a lifeline, its vivid warmth flooding me with determination.

Gently, I ease my father down onto the rug, cradling him as tenderly as a mother would her child. Then, I surrender once more to the transformative tide. My form contracts and recedes; the monstrous height recedes into the frame of a youth. Muscles refine themselves, limbs shorten, and I settle into the balanced posture of a young man. The blue robe and leggings that enveloped me in infancy stretch and drape themselves about my new shape, the smooth fabric caressing my skin as it adapts perfectly to each curve and angle.

A rush of remorse drowns me, and the words spill out in a torrent: "I'm so sorry, Father. I never meant to hurt you." My voice trembles with genuine contrition, a blend of youthful earnestness and the solemn weight of newfound maturity.

He meets my gaze with gentle understanding, his eyes soft and forgiving. With deft movements, he brushes shards of wood and bits of frayed cloth from my robe, each gesture a quiet affirmation of our bond. "Elias," he murmurs, his tone gentle but firm, "you are still my son, no matter the shape you take."

Then, in a quiet display of his own power, he reconstructs the broken cradle, weaving the fragments into a makeshift bed to cradle me once more in comforting familiarity.

Side by side, we retreat into sleep: I peel off my robe and nestle into the newly fashioned bed, and he curls up on the soft, woven rug at my side. In that peaceful silence, the echoes of chaos fade, and father and son rest together beneath the gentle watch of the night.

Chapter 7

The following morning, my father's soft voice and the gentle brush of his paw across my shoulder stir me from a dreamless slumber. The chamber remains cloaked in dusky half-light, pale rays of dawn slipping through the gauzy curtains to cast a warm, honeyed glow upon the crystal floor. A cool breeze drifts in through the open window, carrying the faint scent of dew-damp grass and distant honeysuckle.

I lie still for a moment, sensing his steady presence by my bedside—an unspoken promise that he has watched over me long before my eyes opened. When I finally sit up, my muscles protest with the dull ache of last night's transformations, each throb a reminder of the changes coursing through my bones and sinew. My father's face, framed by a halo of morning light, breaks into a comforting smile, his eyes soft with pride and concern. "I've made breakfast," he murmurs, voice low and warm. "Or you could hunt, if that's what you'd like."

A cold shiver runs down my spine at the thought of hunting again—of relinquishing control to the creature I was last night. I shake my head, determination steadying my voice. "I'll eat your breakfast," I reply. Rising from the bed, I slip into my robe, its fabric cool and smooth against my skin, and follow him out of the chamber.

In the dining chamber, golden lamplight mingles with the early sunbeams, illuminating a simple wooden table set with steaming porridge, fresh berries, and a small loaf of crusty bread. I take my seat, and spoon porridge into my mouth, its warmth soothing the remnants of last night's turmoil. Between bites,

I speak of the strange, energetic surge as my bones reknit themselves, of the dizzying whirlwind in my mind when consciousness shifted into something partly new. I describe how the world felt too large then, and how afterwards everything seemed sharper—colours brighter, sounds crisper, and my senses alive in ways I'd never known.

My father listens without interrupting, his fur-brushed ear twitching now and then as he studies my face. When I finish, he reaches across the table to rest his paw gently on my hand. "It must have been terrifying, Elias," he says, voice soft with regret. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

I feel a surge of pride at his concern. "I think I kept it from hurting you," I say, uncertain but hopeful.

He smiles and pats my hand. "You did, my son. That means more to me than you know." He sighs, and in that wistful exhale I sense all he wished for—the chance to watch me grow from a helpless infant into the young adult I am now.

Between mouthfuls of his own grass and fruits, he mentions finding me books that match whatever age I am now—tales of adventure, tomes of learning, stories to guide me through every season of life. I imagine them already stacked on a shelf, their spines bright with promise.

When breakfast is done and his turn in the bathchamber ends, my father tells me he must return to Talla. "I'll fetch you a pair of boots," he explains, eyes gleaming with anticipation. "The leather she has is supple yet strong—perfect for the many paths you'll walk."

Some minutes later, I emerge to find him waiting in front of the door, a pair of new boots at his feet. Soft blue leather, polished to a subtle sheen, their edges still smell faintly of fresh dye and oiled hide. I crouch to slip one boot on, marvelling at how the supple material moulds to my foot. As I tighten the laces, the snug embrace feels like a promise: wherever I go next, I'll be ready.

Chapter 8

The leather of my boots sighs and groans under each pull of the laces, the scent of oiled hide mingling with the musty chill of dawn as I settle them snugly around my ankles. Before I can stand, Leera's presence unfurls in my mind—a silken whisper of thought that drifts towards my father. Her telepathic voice shimmers like moonlight on water, urgent and unshakably calm, carrying the news that the High Council has been convened to weigh my arrival. The

words settle over me like a cloak of frost: their opinion could reshape everything I know.

My father turns his eyes on me. His gaze is steady as iron, and I feel the echo of Leera's message slide into his consciousness, met by his own quiet resolve. "You and Parnax should see him first," he declares, each syllable measured so that no protest can take hold. My heart hammers—anticipation and dread swirling in equal measure—but his unruffled calm lends me a shard of confidence.

A pulse of Magence ripples through the air, and in an instant Leera and Parnax stand before us. The light bends around their forms, making the walls glow for a heartbeat before settling back into shadow. Parnax's vast, yellow wings flutter with gossamer softness, quivering like petals in a breeze. Leera's white fur seems to absorb the sparse light, radiating a pale luminescence that warms the darkness. They blink at me with wide, curious eyes—Parnax's glittering like stars, Leera's deep and serene. I sense wonder in their minds, as though they, too, are surprised by the life crackling in my limbs. I myself am surprised to sense that Parnax is fully animated by Magence.

"You have grown," Leera breathes, her voice rich with melody and understanding. "I expected to find a newborn."

My father smiles—a ghost of amusement crossing his features—and opens his mind as though lifting a curtain. Memories pour out in vivid torrents: the sudden rush of power last night, the fierce battle for control, the final triumphant breath when I claimed dominion over my true self. Each moment streaks by like a constellation blazing across a starless sky, until Leera and Parnax stand hushed, absorbing the cascade.

Parnax inclines his head, antennae flicking with interest. "You have advanced remarkably in a single night," he says, his voice a soft hum that vibrates against my skin. He alights on my shoulder, feather-light, and peers at me from a winged vantage. "May I?" he asks, and I nod.

He circles me with meticulous care, his Magence brushing like warm breath against my scalp and spine as he traces every contour. The sensation is both intimate and clinical—like being sketched with light. After a time, he returns to my shoulder. "You are healthy," he pronounces, awe simmering beneath his tone. "I judge your physical form to be that of an eighteen-year-old." He tilts his head, antennae quivering. "But your mind... is uneven. Some faculties run

deep as ancient wells, while others remain shallow. I could harmonise them—but such a change might remake who you are.”

My father’s eyes flick to me, calm yet expectant. “What do you think, Elias?” His question hangs between us like a stone bridge, and I feel its weight press against my chest.

The thought of surrendering myself to that creature sends a shiver of fear through my bones. Yet I know who I’ve become. I draw a steady breath. “I’ll remain as I am,” I say, voice firm but tender, like a fledgeling testing its wings. I glance at my father, searching his gentle gaze for guidance.

Leera inclines her head, her eyes reflecting the dawn-light promise of new beginnings. “Then it is time,” she says softly, “to present you to the rest of the High Council.” In her words rests both inevitability and hope, and I steel myself for what comes next.

Chapter 9

The world unfolds in a riot of prismatic hues and scintillating light that spins me out of myself and deposits me in the vaulted High Council chamber. The smooth crystal floor catches the glow of the sun shining through the walls. Around me, robed and un-robed nobles stand in statuesque silence, their measured stares as sharp as blades. At my side, my father’s presence is a steady heartbeat beneath my frantic pulse—solid, unwavering, a tether to this alien hall.

A tremor of Magence ripples through the air and, in a brilliant flare, Leera and Parnax are formed before us. Leera’s figure shimmers in a cascade of rose-gold light, her robe whispering like silk caught on a summer breeze. Parnax emerges beside her, yellow wings folding and unfolding in the aftermath of their arrival. For one breathless instant, the world quivers—air warps around their bodies, motes of power drifting like fireflies—then falls into a hush that presses against my ribs.

The moment hangs thick and pregnant, as if the chamber itself is holding its breath before a storm. My father hops forwards, cloak swirling, and his voice rolls through the crystal expanse—a deep, resonant timbre that carries the weight of decades. His words introduce me not merely as his son but as a challenge to the very laws they guard: a declaration carved in unspoken love and fierce defiance.

From the ranks of the Councillors, the black leopard pair Lella and Kran erupt in fury. Kran's muscles ripple beneath his scarlet robe as he crouches, a low, volcanic growl rumbling through the chamber like distant thunder. "This abomination should have been destroyed," he spits, each word sharp as arrowheads. Lella's voice slices the air above him—a crystalline note of anger. "You should have crushed its sac before it had the chance to hatch," she hisses, claws flexing against her sides.

A cascade of whispers surges through the chamber, swaying like a dark tide. I feel it: every gasp, every narrow-eyed glance, every pulse of revulsion. Deep within me, my true self stirs—a hunger that feasts on their loathing, a twisted delight only I can taste. Before the Councillors can lash out, panic and power collide in my veins. I wrench myself free, a tornado of Magence spiralling me back to the sanctuary of my bedchamber.

Here, walls draped in velvet and sun-warmed wood cradle me. The hush presses in—no crystal clatter, no judgemental eyes—only the steady thrum of my slowing heart. I sink into the down-stuffed mattress, inhaling the faint scent of lavender and parchment. For a moment, I taste peace.

But then my father's telepathic voice threads through my mind—a gentle tug, urging me out of hiding. I cannot linger in safety. I rise again, and in a pulse of light I reappear before the High Council, my father waiting with infinite patience and a touch of pride etched into his face.

Parnax tilts his head, his wings folding with a thoughtful rustle. His multifaceted eyes lock onto me. "You may be the result of generations of selective breeding," he muses, voice soft as evening wind, "your attractiveness a trap even you cannot perceive."

Confusion knots my throat. "I see nothing remotely attractive," I reply, brows drawn together as the air around me crackles.

"There may be others like you," Parnax continues, gaze flickering with designs I cannot read. "An entire pattern woven into a larger, darker tapestry. We were fortunate that Benna found you... that he brought you into our fold."

Syl's voice threads through the chamber like a silken dagger. "I did not foresee you," she whispers, each syllable suspended in the air like spinning motes of black dust. "I still see nothing." Her words curl around my spine, a riddle half-spoken, a future unwritten.

Beside her, Danessa and Darfor stand in quiet harmony: Danessa's soft smile like wind over still water, Darfor's steady gaze a warm ember in the gloom. They incline towards me, curiosity bright in their eyes, anticipation coloring their gentle expressions.

Leera's gaze sweeps the assembly, alighting on me with weighty solemnity. The golden runes woven into her sleeves catch the light, and she pronounces, "This morning, you will have your Choosing Ceremony." Her words glow with promise: a new name, a destiny uncharted, a place among them.

Outcry rises once more from Lella and Kran, shrill voices rebelling, but Leera's stern gaze cuts through their clamour. She turns to my father. "Elias will need the Book of Love without delay," she states, regal calm lacing each word. "It will prepare him for the... attention his new life may bring." I wonder how any book could equip me for the whirlwind ahead.

Lella's eyes narrow, Kran's tail lashing. They hurl a demand: I must be sterilised, the aberration rendered incapable of perpetuating itself. Their cries are jagged shards of glass, but the chamber stills under Leera's blazing reply.

Her anger flares like twin suns, rare and blinding. "The final decision rests with me," she declares, voice echoing like a peal of triumph. "Elias is a Maginist, and he shall be treated as such." She steps forwards, vision soaring. "He may one day be the bridge we need—he may be the one to end the war."

My father's silhouette stands firm as a bastion of stone. "He is my son for life," he states simply, and in that declaration every doubter falls silent before the immovable truth of his love.

I feel my true self tremble with anticipation—a static thrill coursing through me. The future sprawls before us like a vast, unspun tapestry.

With a final, imperious gesture, Leera closes the meeting. The air stills, and the Choosing Ceremony awaits.

Chapter 10

Talla's workshop bursts with color and invention: rolls of fabric lean against sunlit walls, each bolt a riot of hue—emerald satin shimmering like dew, scarlet velvet as rich as spilled wine, shimmering threads of gold and silver dancing in the lantern glow. Scissors click and thrum against worktables cluttered with beads, ribbons, and spools of thread. A faint, comforting scent

of lavender and beeswax drifts through the air. I stand wide-eyed as my father speaks with Talla, his voice low and earnest, explaining his need for a new ceremonial robe for himself. Talla's large ears swivel forwards; her slender hooves lift swatches of cloth, trailing them through the air to reveal hidden patterns: spirals of ivy in green and umber, filigrees of starlight in ivory and pearl. She nods, her lips curling into a soft smile, and her dark eyes shine like polished ebony. Then her gaze settles on me. "Handsome," she declares, and the single word slides over my skin like an unfamiliar melody, sweet and strange.

The Great Hall yawns open before me, a vaulted chamber of clear crystal carved with ancient runes. Torchlight flickers against stained-glass windows, casting pools of red and blue onto the floor. Every resident of the Maginist Tower stands shoulder to shoulder in a circle so broad it vanishes into shadow. At the centre, beneath a grand chandelier of glowing crystals, I share the dais with the High Council—Leera in her golden robe, my father's paw steady on my leg. My heart hammers with the weight of their expectation.

Leera sweeps a graceful arm towards a table carved from living oak. Resting atop it are six objects, each pulsing with its own magic: a gossamer feather that drifts in a ghostly breeze; a smooth pebble mottled with russet veins and faint tendrils of root; a flickering orange flame, warm enough to kiss my fingertips; a crystalline drop of water, suspended in midair and glinting like a miniature moon; a sliver of pale light that pulses in my sight; and a shard of absolute darkness, cool to the touch and whispering of hidden depths. They hum, each aura beckoning. My father leans close. "Choose with your heart," he murmurs. "Whichever you take, it is yours to keep."

I let my eyes slowly drift over each object, taking in every detail. My attention lingers on the pebble, its smooth surface glistening faintly under the soft light. It seems to beckon me with its subtle beauty, calling out with an unspoken allure that I find irresistible.

I reach for the pebble—its weight steady, its scent earthy—declaring my affinity with Earth. In the heartbeat that follows, the other objects quiver and lift, drifting off the table to hover before me. A collective gasp rolls through the Hall; then a storm of voices rises. "Impossible!" they roar in unison, the echo like thunder against stone. My father's calm voice cuts through the clamour: no Maginist has ever wielded more than three Disciplines, let alone all six. Light and Dark have never mingled, much less with the primal four. The

crowd's curiosity curdles into fear and anger—they see in me the blood of their ancient foe and power they cannot fathom.

Leera steps forwards, her presence like a soothing tide, but the uproar only swells. From the throng emerges a towering bipan brown bear clad in a yellow robe, a gap where his left arm should be. He moves with deliberate grace, each footfall resonating through the crystal floor. Lifting his broad muzzle, he unleashes a roar so deep and resonant that it silences every voice. Then, with surprising gentleness, he pads towards me, his brown eyes warm as ember light.

My father shifts to shield me, muscles coiled, but the bear bows his great head and smiles, an expression of pure sincerity. "I am Darm," he rumbles, each word vibrating through my chest. "It will be my honour to train you." I feel the solidity of his promise and nod, easing my father's tension with the faith blooming in my own heart.

At that moment, Talla appears at the crowd's edge, clutching a flowing robe of forest green adorned with vine-embroidered hem, supple brown leggings, and sturdy boots of tanned leather. Her hooves click softly on the crystal floor as she approaches and holds the garments out to me. With a mere thought, the new outfit replaces the one I wear. A ripple of astonished murmurs sweeps through the assembly. "A natural," someone breathes, awe and disbelief entwined. "Very handsome," another whispers, marvelling at my appearance in this new guise.

Leera raises a hand for silence. "He is one of us," she declares, her voice clear as crystal. "His training begins this afternoon." The crowd parts and drifts away, leaving behind a hushed trail of speculation. Torchlight dances on deserted benches; the air buzzes with fresh possibility, as though the very walls await the story yet to be written.

Many have departed, leaving the Great Hall silent and still, yet a lone dragonfly remains, its delicate wings shimmering in the sunlight. With a graceful, almost ethereal motion, it approaches me, hovering in the air around me like a tiny guardian. "He's painting your picture," my father explains, his voice a gentle murmur against the quiet. "It's a tradition of the Choosing Ceremony. The pictures are meant for display in the chambers and other places, capturing this moment for eternity."

Before I begin my training, my father gently guides me to a polished oak desk in his study, where the air is thick with the rich scent of aged parchment and the soft glow of Magence fills the chamber. One of my pictures is also here, proudly on display. My father summons an array of books, each one floating towards me in a graceful procession of knowledge, settling onto the desk like a flock of obedient birds coming to roost. The last book is larger and more imposing than the rest, its cover adorned with intricate designs and an aura of mystery. It is the Book of Love, the very one Leera had mentioned at the meeting. My father instructs me to study it first, to ready myself for the attention I'm destined to receive. He explains that Maginists typically delve into its pages at the age of fourteen, but since I have aged eighteen years in less than a single day, I must read it now. With a solemn nod, he leaves me alone, the weight of his expectations pressing down like the very air around me.

I open the Book of Love, my fingers brushing over its textured pages as I dive into its depths. Each section unveils a new facet of emotion and connection, with chapters devoted to friendship, romantic love, and physical intimacy. I start at the very beginning, absorbing each word eagerly, like a sponge soaking up the first drops of rain after a long drought. When I reach the part on romantic love, I pause, my mind swirling with questions about how anyone could possibly feel such profound emotions for someone like me. Beneath my surface thoughts, the deep current of my true self hungrily devours the information, its appetite boundless and unashamed.

The section on physical intimacy is detailed and startling, with its stark truths laid bare. It states that the minimum age for such experiences is sixteen, and though the information is unsettling, I press on. The book then unfurls into vivid, animated pages of pictures, each scene unfolding with astonishing clarity and vibrancy. I find myself both shocked and fascinated, and gradually, I begin to grasp the urgency behind my father's instructions.

Once I have absorbed all I can, I close the book with a soft thud and take a moment to process this influx of new knowledge. I decide that such matters are not meant for me, not with the danger my true self continually poses. It attempts to coax me, whispering its own desires in a voice both tempting and insistent, but my mind remains steadfast and resolute.

I spend the rest of the morning engrossed in the other books, delving into the annals of history and the fundamentals of Magence techniques. Time slips by,

unnoticed, within the quiet, comforting cocoon of the study until the sound of my father's voice calls me to join him for lunch.

Chapter 12

The morning air crackles with anticipation as my father guides me towards the training ground. Sunlight filters through the tall pines, dappling the packed earth with shifting mosaics of light and shadow. A symphony of distant birdcalls and the soft rustle of leaves underscores the tension that hums beneath the surface, a hidden flame awaiting ignition.

At the edge of the clearing stands Darm, tall and steady, his single arm a silent testament to battles survived and sacrifices honoured. His presence radiates warmth, a comforting hearth amid the chill of anxious expectation. Around him, the other trainees—some with four lithe limbs, others upright and two-legged—cluster in loose circles. Some of them match me in height and build, yet their gazes flare with a volatile mix of hostility, curiosity, fear, and something dangerously close to longing. I taste their emotions on the breeze, a banquet for my true self, which pulses with hungry delight.

Darm inclines his head to my father. "I will watch over him," he assures, voice rich and steady as polished bronze. My father, High Council member and close personal friend of Leera, hesitates. He could linger here, free to stay until the lesson ends, but his eyes, dark with unspoken worry, seek mine. I crouch to lay a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Go," I murmur. "Your duties await. I'm safe." At last he nods, reluctance etched in every line of his silhouette as he recedes down the shaded path—his figure the final brushstroke on the horizon.

Darm's deep voice gathers the trainees like a conductor summoning an orchestra. He presents me with a flourish, as though unveiling a precious relic. My heart thrums in my chest. We step towards a long oaken table hewn from a single fallen trunk, its surface glittering with an array of weapons: slender swords with etched runes, spears tipped in crystalline steel, daggers coiled in serpentine designs, and elegantly carved longbows. Each piece hums its own metallic melody under the sun's caress.

"The Maginist's choice is made at five years old," Darm explains, sweeping his paw over the collection. "You are years behind—eighteen by birth, thirteen by form—but choice lies not in age, but in affinity." A tremor of uncertainty prickles my skin, yet beneath it surges an exhilaration my true self savours like a dark treasure. I close my eyes, feeling the weapons' auras throb through my

palms, each pulse a note in an unseen chord. The simple wooden staff calls to me above all: its grain warm and living, whispering of balance and possibility. I draw it from the table, its smooth shaft fitting naturally into my hand as though it has always belonged there.

Darm conjures his own staff with a swift, fluid motion, the polished wood gleaming under the sun. He demonstrates the basic stances with crisp precision, each movement sharp and deliberate, as if choreographed by an unseen master. The other trainees lean in closer, their eyes glittering with anticipation and silent wagers placed on my imminent failure. The air is thick with tension, the kind that crackles with energy and unspoken challenges.

I grip my staff and rise into a guard position. The world slows: birds pause mid-song, the breeze stills. Muscle memory blossoms, an elegant choreography unfolding in my limbs. Each swing, thrust, and parry flows seamlessly, the staff an extension of my will. With every controlled, fluid motion, a thrill arcs through me—my true self exulting at this unexpected mastery, sending ripples of awe through the assembled trainees.

As they turn to their Magence exercises, the training ground becomes a theatre of elemental power. Lightning forks across the sky in a jagged dance, heat-laden waves of flame writhe and coil like living serpents, water erupts in arcs of shimmering spray, and earth shudders beneath the force of summoned rock. The raw energy sings in my ears, scorches my skin with radiant potential, and stirs a craving in my blood for that same primal display.

When the moment arrives, Darm beckons me forwards. “Show me what you’ve learned from your studies,” he invites. I draw on every tidbit gleaned from dusty tomes—six Disciplines, each a pillar of Magence—and weave them together. The air around me shivers as fire and water spill into one another, forging hissing steam. Earth fractures into floating fragments ringed with pale light, while air currents twist them into orbit. Then darkness pools beneath my feet, light spiraling overhead in a kaleidoscope of raw power briefly suspended, a spiderweb of impossible forces.

Even the most hostile trainees press closer, their scowls melting into wide-eyed wonder. When I lower my arms, the web of Magence dissolves into a cascade of motes that drift skyward like tiny stars. Attitudes shift: suspicion softens into admiration, veiled flirtations spark in captive glances. Yet I feel no pull towards romantic entanglement—I have chosen a different path.

At that moment, my father reappears at the treeline—his presence a welcome harbour against the storm of emotions. Darm steps forwards, his voice rich with pride as he recounts my achievements. My father's concerned visage breaks into a radiant smile, warmth flooding his gaze until it overflows. I feel the space between us swell with the tide of his approval.

We return to our chambers as the sun dips low, the promise of a new life blossoming before me in hues of gold and purple. Footsteps echo on smooth crystal, and a table is set with steaming bowls and savoury aromas that speak of home. Tomorrow, the training ground beckons anew—but tonight, I dine with my father, wrapped in the gentle assurance that whatever I choose, I will never walk alone.

Chapter 13

Each dawn stretches before me like the cautious unfurling of rose petals, each layer revealing another corridor of the Tower, its ancient crystal walls cool to the touch and faintly scented with dust and Magence. I settle into this new rhythm: the steady clatter of steel on stone during drills, the tang of sweat and oil in the air, and the low hum of enchanted lanterns lining the corridors. My lessons progress smoothly—I parry, I cast, I hone each flicker of Magence until it becomes second nature. In time, I share quiet smiles and tentative bows with fellow trainees whose eyes gleam with curiosity and threaded desire. Still, I leave no room for intimacy: my lips curve in polite dismissal whenever flirtation edges too close.

Then, without warning, chaos shatters our routine. A thunderous roar tears through the morning calm as Sar Ala warriors charge towards the Tower. Darm's voice, a resonant bellow, cuts through the panic: "To the arena—now!" His broad shoulder parts the fleeing crowd as we race for shelter, forgoing teleportation, which is too dangerous when a person is fearful.

Usually I drown out the tumult of other minds, but now I hear them all: fear, confusion, desperate courage. Beneath the din, my father's resolve glimmers—he will fight. My true self stirs, urging action. I heed that silent summons. Forcing calm, and gathering Magence at my fingertips, I vanish in a crackle of silver-blue light and reappear amid the fray.

Claws flash like jagged lightning, shrieking as they meet my shield of pure energy. The stink of blood clogs my senses, panic roaring in my veins, yet at my centre lies a calm iron heart. Doubt skirts the edges of my will, but each pulse of Magence rends Sar Ala sinew and bone. They shudder, shatter, and

by the time they comprehend the true threat, they crumble like brittle statues. The survivors flee in ragged masses, and around me, the other Maginists stand frozen, gobsmacked.

From the smoke and dust, my father emerges—every deliberate hop of his powerful legs announcing pride honed by countless battles. His robe flutters raggedly, yet his gaze burns with unyielding triumph. Ahead, wounded comrades slump on torn earth, faces ashen with pain. Silently, I weave light through my palms, calling forth a warm, radiant aura that pours over them in golden tendrils, knitting flesh and mending shattered bone. In a glittering flash I return to the arena and announce in a quiet voice: “It is finished. We have won.”

A stunned hush falls. Eyes swivel, disbelief giving way to awe as they realise it was my hand that turned the tide. The same trainees who once lingered over my smile now watch me with reverent fascination. Together we file back to the training ground, the scent of damp earth, sweat, and triumph heavy in the air. Without a second’s pause, I summon my staff once more, plunging into drills and sorcery with renewed purpose—resolute to sharpen my power until no threat can ever breach these boundaries again.

Chapter 14

The Sar Ala launch their assaults with unyielding ferocity, relentless as the pounding of a tribal drum, yet I repel them each time with fierce determination. In the midst of battle, I join the ranks of my fellow Maginists, my Magence flowing with precision and agility, my true self exulting in the exhilarating dance of combat. The survivors scatter, leaving behind a grim testament to their defeat as the bodies of their fallen comrades pile higher with each assault. Initially, the other Maginists regard me with astonishment, their disbelief palpable, but as the months roll on, their skepticism wanes. With each encounter, fewer of our own are lost, for I stand as a steadfast and unforeseen ally, a bulwark against the tide of destruction. Our fallen find rest in the crystal embrace of the crypt, their memories intertwining with my own, echoing in my mind like whispers of past lives. Gradually, the attacks dwindle, until they nearly vanish, and in the void left by the absence of battle, I am left with an unexpected yearning for the adrenaline-fuelled chaos.

In the lull, I turn my focus inwards, immersing myself in the discipline of training, the rhythm of routine stepping in to fill the void left by combat's departure. I hone my skills with the staff, its polished wood an extension of my

arm, and with each day, my Magence grows stronger and more potent. Darm, my mentor, observes my progress with a watchful eye, his steady presence a deep, resonant bass note underscoring my efforts. In the familiarity of routine, I find solace, the unfolding of each day a comforting map whose paths are well-trodden and reassuring.

The other trainees continue to observe me, their gazes a tapestry of mixed emotions, but I learn to meet their attention with poise. Their curiosity burns as brightly as ever, yet now it is tinged with a respect that tempers previous hostility. Some are openly flirtatious, their intentions clear and unabashed, and I respond to their advances with an air of calm detachment. The Book of Love, with its intimate guidance, has prepared me for this terrain I shall never wander. While a few persist in their bullying, many others accept my presence, acknowledging it as an inevitable part of our shared existence.

In moments of respite, I retreat to the tranquil haven of my father's and my chambers, where the air is thick with the rich scent of aged wood and the quiet, comforting hum of Magence. Though his duties with the High Council often call him away, his essence lingers in every detail, from the precise arrangement of the furniture to the gentle way light filters through the curtains. When he is present, we share a companionable silence, the space between us filled with unspoken understanding and the profound bond we have nurtured over time.

Chapter 15

The air around me shivers with possibility, a kaleidoscope of light and shadow twisting in every direction as I weave Earth and Water with a breath of pure Light. Magence coils into being—forest-green vines of energy blossoming into crystalline petals that pulse in perfect symmetry, each movement measured, deliberate, and impossibly graceful. I taste the faint tang of ozone on my tongue as the ordered shapes bloom before me, their mirrored surfaces shimmering like dew-dappled spiderwebs at dawn.

Then I pivot, gutting the balance and pouring Fire and Air into a heart of Dark. The atmosphere ruptures in response: flickering embers whirl with gale-force gusts, a tempest of black and crimson that snarls and writhes without heed to my commands. Sparks crackle like staccato laughter, and the roar of chaos fills my chest. The contrast between creation and ruin, harmony and havoc, sets my pulse racing—each conjuration a reflection of my own fractured soul.

At the edge of the circle, Darm stands motionless, his shadowed eyes bright with approval. He beckons the other trainees forwards with a subtle nod, and one by one they close in, their faces lit by the glow of my magic—mouths agape, disbelief carved into every line. The collective weight of their stares prickles my skin, but I banish their scrutiny from my mind, anchoring myself in purpose. With a steady mental push, I urge the ordered lattice and the wild maelstrom higher, watching them spiral upwards in an entrancing duet. Pride uncoils in my chest, spreading warmth through every vein.

“High Council,” Darm projects, his voice a low ripple in our shared consciousness. “You must see this.”

No more than a heartbeat later, they are upon us. The training ground grows heavy, as though the very air has thickened under their presence. I sense them all: Leera’s gentle warmth, Parnax’s restless curiosity, and the rest of the Council stationed like statues carved from moonlight—aloof, inscrutable, bristling with expectation. My hands tingle, but I force my focus back to the swirling Magence before me.

At last, the two creations settle into their orbits: one a filigreed network of green light, each strand precise and unwavering; the other a fervent cyclone of shadow and flame, its edges flickering unpredictably. I release a breath I hadn’t realised I was holding. Every ounce of me blooms in that triumph, as if starlight pulses beneath my skin.

Then the names come—they drift into my mind on an ageless whisper, carrying the weight of genesis itself. I gift them to the still air, my voice rippling outwards in telepathic resonance: “Order...and...Chaos.”

The words hang between us like stained glass in sunlight. Astonishment ripples through the trainees; a few swallow hard, eyes wide. My father, Darm, and Leera exchange glances that glow with pride, the space between us warmed by their shared approval. I feel both exalted and unsteady, as though I stand on the brink of something wondrous and terrifying.

Leera steps forwards, her presence a soothing current that sweeps away my doubts. She lifts her snout, her melodic voice ringing clear: “This calls for celebration. Tonight, in the Great Hall. Elias, you will sit at the top table with the High Council.”

A hush falls—and then Lella, lips pressed in a thin line, leans towards Kran. Their eyes narrow in silent conspiracy before Lella’s clipped voice cuts

through the hush: “Such an anomaly cannot be lauded. Only this...creature...can wield these Disciplines.”

Leera’s gaze sharpens, her patience worn to a fine edge. “We have heard enough,” she says, every syllable a quiet command. “Let us not forget ourselves in my presence.”

Across the circle, the Council shuffles, alliances wavering like reeds in a restless stream. Lella’s glare smoulders, but she falters, realising she has overstepped.

“Tell everyone to don their finest robes,” Leera instructs, her tone smoothing over the tension like silk. “The celebration will begin at dinnertime.”

They disperse then, leaving currents of confusion and reluctant acceptance in their wake. My father pauses by my side, his gaze soft and proud. “You have astounded us all, Elias,” he murmurs, his words a gentle echo at the edge of my mind.

I watch him drift away—a slow swirl of color and emotion trailing like a comet’s tail—until the training ground stands empty save for Darm, the remaining trainees, and the lingering hum of Magence still sparkling in the air.

“A celebration,” Darm rumbles, each word a deep resonance. “You must be very proud.”

I stare at the fading patterns, my heart a tangle of anticipation and doubt. “I—I don’t know what to feel,” I admit, my confession fluttering like a loose thread.

Darm’s paw rests on my shoulder, a warm anchor. “You should feel exactly as you wish.”

I nod, uncertainty and gratitude weaving through me as I turn to face the path ahead—a horizon aglow with promise, celebration, and the thrilling unknown.

Chapter 16

The weeks tumble into months like raindrops gathering in a stream, and the months stretch into years as if time itself were caught in an unbroken melody—each moment a soft, silent echo of the last. My first, second, and third birthdays arrive in a blur of icing-sweet cake and brightly-wrapped gifts, the murmur of laughter and applause floating around me, yet my body refuses to change. I remain forever poised at eighteen, as though time cares more for

my mind than my flesh. The idea of perpetual stasis coils in my chest, gnawing away any certainty I once held. Parnax drifts into my thoughts on a whisper of Magence light, his voice a low, vibrating hum. “Perhaps the Sar Ala neglected your brain,” he muses, each syllable resonant and deliberate. “They focused all their craft on your body’s growth.” He suggests their cold calculus led them to abandon my egg sac the moment they realised their error. His thoughts, warm and insistent, brush mine like a breeze urging me to face the void at my core. “Training must be a priority,” he adds, the promise of power threading through the words. “For you, and for everyone.”

Yet my own training becomes my greatest trial. The bullying cuts sharper than any blade—endless barbed words shot with surgical precision by older trainees determined to sow doubt in my heart. Their resentment simmers like poison in their thoughts, each glare a spark ready to ignite. And still, Darm stands beside me, steady as stone, making me his assistant, tasking me with demonstrating forms and flourishes to the others. His encouragement falls over me like a healing rain, the soft rumble of his faith drowning out every cruel echo. Gradually, the other trainers mirror his example—reluctant glances turning into nods of respect, their stiff courtesy a fragile gesture of peace I clutch with trembling relief. My true self soars on these winds of change, yet a small, stubborn voice inside me whispers that it might vanish at any moment.

Between sessions the taunts persist, but I wrap myself in numbness, the names—freak, mutant, monster—hollowed by repetition. I shelter beneath Darm’s unwavering kindness, a fortress against their onslaught, and turn my focus to the two things I can command: my staff, its polished wood yielding to my grip, its smooth grain an extension of my very sinews, and Magence, which coils around me in eight shimmering strands—threads of living light I weave into patterns that defy logic, each motion a testament to my growing mastery. Still, amid every flourish and triumph, the long shadow of what I am looms just beyond the glow, a dark cloud reminding me that even triumph can carry its own weight of dread.

Chapter 17

The wind sweeps across the plateau like a wild aria, its gusts rising and falling in fierce crescendos that set the tall grasses rustling and swirl threads of dust into dancing eddies. I close my eyes for a moment, tasting the tang of ozone and feeling a flicker of peace as my father and I stand on a rocky outcrop, watching the Howls claim their untamed freedom below. He brings me here whenever the world grows too heavy—the sharp barbs of teenage cruelty and

the unwanted, hungry glances cast my way—both cling to me like a damp robe, more suffocating than any insult.

Below us, the Howls move with a fluid grace older than memory. Their coats gleam bronze and umber in the sun, sinewy haunches propelling them in silent leaps. Each step seems charged with ancient knowledge—shadows of magic woven into their muscled bodies. My father whispers that generations of Maginists have tried and failed to communicate with the Howls. “They answer only the wind,” he says, his voice rich with admiration. “They remain truly wild—spirits untrammelled by Magence or mortal design.”

He gestures to the distant silhouette of the Maginist Tower, its peak rising like a broken fang of crystal, shaped in tribute to these majestic beasts. “Leera chose me to watch over them,” he adds, pride tinting his voice. “To help, should they ever need it.” So far, the Howls have needed nothing from us, the Sar Ala’s relentless sieges being aimed solely at the Tower.

My father’s paw sweeps across the herd, settling on two regal figures, the herd leaders. Loka, a magnificent white cock-stallion with black spots, and Shayli, his hen-mare Ama, grey with golden wings and tail, stand guard beside a single egg. Its shell is the color of moonlight. My father gave them their names, though the creatures themselves know nothing of words.

A tremor ripples through the egg, a soft pulse that quickens into a gentle vibration along its glossy dome. Fine cracks spider outwards, each fissure catching the light like a network of glowing veins. The hush on the plateau deepens; even the wind seems to pause.

Then the shell splits with a breathlike sigh. A newborn Howl girl emerges, her tiny bipan frame glistening with pink skin and downy feathers. She blinks up at the sky, and the herd’s calm fractures into frantic energy. Loka rears, heavy hooves poised to crush the fragile infant.

I leap forwards, teleporting into his path in a flash of Magence-tinged light. A prismatic barrier snaps into existence between us, sparks of Magence sputtering along its rim. The herd halts mid-charge, ear tufts flattened, nostrils flaring at my scent—predator woven of spirit and flesh.

Kneeling, I extend a trembling hand. The baby Howl’s cry shudders into silence as I cradle her, my warmth seeping through her quivering limbs. Around us, the Howls slow, their panic ebbing into wary curiosity. I conjure a blanket spun of rose-tinted threads, each filament soft as a sigh, and cocoon

her in its gentle embrace. The hush deepens further, and I lift her towards Shayli's side. The infant presses her mouth to the teat, sighing in relief as milk, warm and alive, floods her.

"I name you Galea," I murmur, letting the words float on the breeze like a promise. Her eyelids flutter, heavy with trust.

As Loka and Shayli watch their unique daughter feed, their initial wary gazes gradually soften, transforming into expressions of deep love and affection. Her tiny fingers grasp at the air, and the rhythmic sound of her gentle sucking fills it. Once she's finished, I lift her carefully against my shoulder, patting her back with tender care until a small, satisfied burp escapes her lips.

A thought shapes the bark of a nearby tree. Limbs bend and hollow out, forming a snug chamber warmed by a hearth of living Magence. I fill it with a wardrobe, a tiny bath, plush toys, and a cradle. I design dresses as filmy as dawn mist, and undergarments stitched with care. Dressing Galea, and weaving small wildflowers into her soft hair, I watch her yawn.

For her first gift, I sculpt a crystal rabbit whose facets catch every ray of sun and split it into dancing rainbows. It perches on a shelf formed from the tree, conjured by my will alone. "It will never break, never stray, never harm you," I promise, voice low. "And each year, on your birthday, another friend shall arrive."

Galea curls in the cradle, eyelids drifting closed. I rise and face Loka and Shayli. "I will be here whenever she needs anything," I vow, letting the words hang in the air like a lullaby yet unsung.

Chapter 18

The next couple of years slip by like a half-remembered dream, a shifting haze of long study sessions, sweat-stained training drills, and abrupt, sparkling teleportations to the Howls' windswept plateau. There, I cradle Galea's tiny form and answer her ever-growing needs. Her delight in every flicker of sunlight, every whisper of grass beneath her fingers is contagious—a bright, breathless wonder that infuses the air with a crisp newness I once knew as a hatchling.

But as whispers of my guardianship spread, so too does a tide of unwanted attention: flirtations at dawn and declarations at dusk that threaten to wash over me in relentless waves. Cruel tongues wag that Galea is my daughter by

a Howl, that I have mated with half a herd of them—each rumour crafted to wound, each accusation sharpened like a dagger.

I have mated with no one, and I wish not to.

My father's calm voice anchors me: ignore them, he says, they speak from envy and insecurity. It is not easy to rise above the barbs, but I try. He urges me to revisit the glow of Galea's first faltering steps and the astonished melody of her first word, replaying those images like priceless jewels when doubt weighs heavy. I cling to the thought of those shining memories, a lantern in my darkest hours.

Still, the present presses in with unrelenting insistence. Rumours gather thick as storm clouds on the horizon, their weight a constant drag on my spirit. I resist the urge to withdraw into silence, to hide from prying eyes and whispered judgements. Instead, I press onwards, each step an act of defiance, my course uncharted but unwavering.

My sole sanctuary lies with the Howls themselves. Here, amid their broad wings and keen, watchful eyes, I discover I understand the subtle cadences of their world—the low, thrumming calls of horse and the soft, plaintive hoots of owl. Their language unfolds like a secret melody only I can hear. In response, they lower their defences, curiosity melting wariness into a fragile camaraderie.

Galea's laughter echoes across the plateau whenever I approach, bright and resonant as a bell. Her first steps wobbled towards me over thick grass, a determined journey that kindled warmth in my chest. Her first word—"Lias"—slipped from her lips like a song I carry with me, its notes lingering long after I depart.

Through it all stands Darm, a pillar of steadfast support. His steady gaze sees past my practised indifference to the turmoil within. "You must feel exactly as you wish," he reminds me, voice as solid as oak—an echo of counsel he offered long ago. His words are a lifeline, a promise that I am not defined by others' perceptions.

Clinging to that promise, I kindle a fierce flame of resolve. Though shadows gather at my heels and rumours swirl like bitter wind, I hold fast—determined to follow my own light into whatever dawn awaits.

The world of the Howls unfolds like a living symphony: the low vibration of their energy hums beneath every wingbeat, every whispered gust of wind. Two years have passed since Galea broke from her egg, and I have seen five cycles of sun and moon. Galea's delight is a bright beacon, spreading through the air in luminous ripples that recall the innocent awe of my own earliest days beside her. I divide my hours between her side and the towering form of the Maginist Tower, but hers remains the richer world—a tapestry of first glances, fresh textures, surprising scents. Her laughter peels away the weight of whispered rumours and narrow stares, warming the edges of my resolve.

Leera's silvery voice drifts to me one evening, soft and insistent. "Galea must learn beside other children," she declares, her voice warm and steady like sunlit honey. "Though she wields no Magence, there is wisdom in play and companionship." My father's quiet echoes reinforce her words, urging me to prepare for Galea's first morning in the Tower's playchamber. Their reasoning is sound, yet I find my heart tightening at the thought of releasing her into unfamiliar halls.

Dawn the next day is soft as spun glass, the sky a gentle wash of pale rose and gold. I summon brown-feathered wings from my shoulders, each plume shimmering in the newborn light, and lift Galea into my arms. Carrying her against my chest (for no Howl may have Magence utilised upon them), we rise into the crisp morning air. Galea's eyes sparkle with anticipation, and I feel the world sharpen—every cloud, every distant spire, every rustle of leaves beneath us.

Inside the playchamber, children's voices blend with the warm glow of woven rugs and scattered wooden toys. Sunbeams slant through tall windows, spotlighting motes of dust that drift like fireflies. Yem greets us with a serene smile, her robe the soft grey of a twilight sky. Had fate turned differently, she might have guided my own studies. "Stay for the morning," she invites, her tone gentle as a lullaby.

I nod, heart tugging as I settle onto a low bench. Yem gathers the children around her, settling them on the floor and giving each a blank sheet of parchment. She raises her paw above her own parchment; tendrils of pale-blue Magence coil from her fur, drawing pigment from the air. Colours bloom where her paw hovers—emerald vines, violet blossoms, streaks of molten gold. Galea watches, breathless, her small face aglow. Yem presses a magic colouring stick into her hand. "It will sing every shade you imagine."

Galea's first creation emerges in bold strokes: a likeness of me, wings unfurled, eyes gentle. Each line trembles with her wonder. Pride swells in my chest, surprising me with its force. "It's perfect," I murmur, and the truth of the words resonates like chimes. "We'll display it in your chamber."

Among the other children sits Rensa—Lella and Kran's youngest—his dark hair falling into fiery eyes that fix on Galea with uncanny intensity. Eela and Karna, his six-year-old twin siblings, glower whenever I cross their path; their inherited loathing seethes in every sneer. I feel the familiar stir of my hidden self, delighted by their contempt even as it warns me of Rensa's dangerous curiosity. Galea remains polite but reserved, her instincts already setting a boundary with the boy's smouldering gaze.

The morning drifts by like a pleasant reverie. Galea dives into new tasks with eager focus: moulding clay into unlikely shapes, arranging coloured stones into patterns that echo the tastes of home. I watch from my bench, each small discovery she makes weaving into my own heart. When midday light floods the chamber, warmth pooling like honey on the crystal floor, I realise how reluctant I am to carry her away.

Wings unfurl once more for our journey back to the Howls' plateau. Galea nestles against my chest, her laughter sparkling like sunlight on water. The wind tugs at my feathers, but it is her joy—bright, unwavering—that anchors me to every precious moment.

Chapter 20

The dawn air shimmers like spun silk, threaded with the bright gold of a thousand shimmering hopes, as I ready myself for Galea's very first flying lesson. Her parents have decided the moment has come, and they've entrusted her to me. A flicker of doubt stirs in my chest: is she truly ready? But they exchange a knowing glance, warm and unwavering. "She is shaped like you," they murmur, voices soft as bird-song. "She will fly like you."

I lead them to a broad meadow, where the grass waves in gentle swells and droplets of dew catch the morning light like scattered diamonds. At the far edge, the herd gathers—creatures of feather and fur, their eyes glinting with curious wonder, a living ocean of silent watchers. The wide-open space feels like a promise, its vastness a balm against my nerves. Still, my heart flutters, a small drumbeat beneath my calm.

Beside me, Galea's form is a bundle of bright energy—her feathers trembling with anticipation. I crouch to her level, inhaling the scent of fresh grass and wildflowers, and whisper, "You'll shine, little one." My voice is a steady beacon in the soft hush of morning, and I feel her tension ease as she offers me a trembling smile.

Slowly, she spreads her wings. Each feather catches the dawn's light, fracturing it into a cascade of tiny rainbows that dance across the meadow. I tell her gently that one day she'll launch straight into the air, as effortlessly as the larks above us. "But today," I say, "you learn to run first."

I rise and begin my demonstration. My legs move in measured strides—muscles shifting beneath my leggings—propelling me forwards across the velvet green. With a sudden surge, I spring into full sprint, the grass blurring beneath my feet. Then, as the wind whips past, I sprout my wings and lift into the sky. The air embraces me like an old friend, guiding me through smooth arcs and low, gliding sweeps just above the tips of the grass.

Galea watches, wide-eyed and breathless, her small wings twitching with longing. She takes her first steps—tiny, determined paces—and then breaks into a run. Her feathers catch on her frenetic motion, a riot of colour as she stumbles in a tangle of limbs. She lands in the grass with a startled laugh, eyes bright with both surprise and delight.

I cheer her on with a nod, my voice sailing over the meadow: "Again!" Undaunted, she lifts herself, feet churning the dew-damp turf, and this time her form is steadier. With a sudden burst of bravery, she leaps—the wind catching her wings as she climbs just a few heartbeats above the ground. The herd erupts in soft calls of approval, their excitement rippling through the air like a wave.

All morning she practises, each attempt a little stronger, a little surer. By midday, between bites of sweet fruit and moments of rest in the warming sun, she's weaving graceful patterns through the sky. The herd's vigil fades into a gentle murmur, their earlier scrutiny replaced by proud smiles.

As the sun sinks low, painting the horizon in rose and amber, we pause. I pull her gently close and press a finger to her heart. "Remember," I say, voice tender as a lullaby, "never fly alone—only with me, your mummy, your daddy, or another grown-up Howl." My words are a silver thread anchoring her to safe ground.

Later, we dine beneath a canopy of stars—roasted grains, sweet fruit, and laughter mingling in the twilight hush. Galea’s eyelids droop, heavy with joyful exhaustion, and I carry her to bed. As I tuck her in, I brush a gentle hand across her forehead. Already her breathing slows, dreams stirring behind her closed eyes—dreams of limitless skies waiting for her to soar once more.

Chapter 21

The world sprawls before us like a vast, sun-bleached chart waiting to be uncovered, and four-year-old Galea and I set out to map its hidden wonders together. Her laughter threads through the morning air like bright silk, and her words tumble over each other in a sparkling torrent as she recounts tales from the Tower school. She describes her friends, the shapes she’s mastering, the pastel chalks smudged across her small fingers. Every story shoots from her lips like a ribbon of colour, and I feel her delight lift me above the grey clouds of my own doubts.

“Rensa is still watching me,” Galea says suddenly, her honeyed voice threaded with unease. She pauses as if listening for footsteps on the wind. “I don’t like it.” A knot tightens in my chest—her concern reminds me too well of old shadows I thought I’d banished.

Before I can soothe her, she freezes, nose lifted to the breeze, her brows knitting together. “Do you smell that?” she whispers, her small wings quivering behind her back.

I shake my head but strain to catch any odd scent. My heart taps a warning against my ribs. Then I see them: a pair of glinting eyes resting in the low branches, reflecting sunlight like amber on water. “Galea,” I murmur, “back away slowly.”

From the thinning trees lumbers a great bear, its fur a shifting tapestry of dark browns and russets. Two curved horns jut from its skull, each with pointed tips. With every deliberate step the earth trembles, pebbles skittering underfoot. I stand firm, arms outstretched. Galea follows my lead, her tiny form taut with trust, her wings folded close as if to shield herself in my shadow.

I judge a safe distance and exhale, relief blooming—only for it to be cut short by the bear’s bellow, a feral roar that tears through the meadow’s calm. Its charge is a thunderclap of raw power. “Fly!” I shout, my voice slicing through the din. “Fly back to the herd!”

She hesitates for a heartbeat, wings uncertain, then bursts upwards like a golden sparrow freed from a cage. I plant my boots, firm in the dew-wet grass, and call my staff to my palm. The familiar weight anchors me as I face the beast's relentless advance.

Its growls roll through the air like distant storms. I pivot, staff sweeping a grace-filled arc, but its bulk shrugs off the strike as though it were a summer breeze. My lungs burn. I summon the ancient currents of Magence, feeling the pulse of power coil beneath my skin. I pour gentle force into the air, weaving currents meant to pacify rather than destroy. Every sinew in my body trembles with the tension of restraint: one misjudged surge, and I could shatter bone and spirit alike.

As I steady myself, an unfamiliar rumbling awakens within me—a dark undertow tugging at my soul. My flesh ripples, bones creaking in protest. An alien form overtakes me; I am both spectator and prisoner in my own flesh. Muscles swell, sinew knits into claws that rend the air. My jaw lengthens into a fearsome maw, an otherworldly glow building behind jagged fangs. In one savage lunging blow I crash into the bear, ripping through its stout hide, heat blazing from my jaws like a miniature sun. The world narrows to the snap of ribs and the hot iron tang of blood. Then the beast topples, a great, heaving monument to my unleashed fury.

Madness claws at my mind, and I force myself back with ragged breaths. Summoning a torrent of crystal water, I drench the bear's motionless form—but life has fled into the soil, leaving only a smouldering husk. Regret gathers like storm clouds inside me.

With trembling hands I shape earth and stone with Magence, burying the fallen creature beneath a mound of soft peat and loamy soil, a whispered apology laid into the dirt. As I stand, dusting soil from my palms, I see her—Galea—peeking from behind a silver birch, her eyes wide, filled with equal parts terror and relief.

I open my mouth to apologise, but before I can form the words, she flutters into my arms. Her weight is small and warm, a tether that steadies my frayed heart. “Are you all right?” she asks, her voice a lilting lullaby of concern.

I swallow past the grit in my throat. “Are you?” I answer instead.

Her earnest gaze meets mine. “I am now.”

Together we turn towards the distant shapes of her herd. Loka and Shayli cross the meadow to meet us, their faces blooming with gratitude. Galea's voice leaps ahead, recounting in rushing syllables: "There was a bear, and 'Lias saved me." She leaves the rest unspoken—and I feel the quiet grace of her mercy. Loka and Shayli thank me with gentle nods, their eyes warm coals of understanding. No questions follow, only a profound comfort that settles around us like a robe made of twilight.

Chapter 22

The world is woven from secrets. I see it in Galea's eyes—the pale green irises flickering with questions she will never voice. They trace the lines of my face, searching for truths I cannot share. She does not ask why the bear attacked or how I survived its claws; her trust in me is absolute, a gossamer thread spun from unspoken vows. The hush between us is heavy, like the hush before dawn, a quiet reminder that some stories are safer left untold.

Beyond our silent bond, other secrets swirl in the air, eddying through the lush grass that carpets the plateau. Loka's words arrive on that wind, carrying news I could never have imagined: by ancient Howl custom, he and Shayli have already named Galea's future Ama. My heart staggers at the thought—surely it must be someone of pure Howl blood, someone as wild and unbroken as the wind.

"You," Loka says, and the single syllable strikes me like a hammer on stone—unyielding, irrevocable. "Elias."

I stagger back, words tumbling from my lips in protest. "I'm too dangerous," I whisper, as though the rough memory of my last transformation still lingers in my bones. My voice cracks. "I nearly—"

Loka's gaze is as steady as the earth beneath our feet. "No match has ever failed," he says quietly, each word a weight dropped into the hollow of my chest.

"I'm not a Howl!" I insist, the protest sounding feeble against the plateau's vast stillness. "I shouldn't have to—"

"You are a member of this herd," Loka interrupts, and the phrase settles around me like a woollen cloak—soothing and suffocating all at once.

I clutch at straws of protest. "What if Galea doesn't want this?"

"If she could decide for herself," Loka replies, his eyes fixed on mine with unwavering certainty, "she would choose you."

I close my eyes, tasting the smoke of twilight in the air and the tang of pine on my tongue. My nod comes slowly, each movement a reluctant weave of acceptance. "She can't know—" I begin, offering my only refuge. "Not until she's old enough to understand what it means."

Loka inclines his head, his voice a soft echo: "Agreed." Between us hangs a tapestry of promise and doubt, threads shimmering in the fading light.

As long shadows stretch across the plateau—branches etching dark veins on green grass—I feel the weight of this new secret settle into my chest. The world is made of secrets, and I am bound by them, every breath a testament to the quiet truths we carry.

Chapter 23

The world is built of secrets, silent structures that hold us captive. Tonight, I bear mine into the lamplit study, its walls lined with leather-bound volumes heavy with dust and cedar. My father sits behind the oaken desk, candlelight sculpting his features as I confess the promise between Galea and me. My words tumble out in a frantic cascade—confession, plea, vow. Apart from him and Leera, no one must know until the time is right; not even Galea, who is too young to fathom such bonds. Voicing it makes the promise solid, the finality sinking into crevices I cannot fill.

I go on, voice trembling, revealing that Loka and Shayli chose me only because I saved Galea from the bear. I fling my mind open like a cracked window and let him glimpse that blood-chilled moment—the forest stilled by the beast's roar, the tang of pine on the air, the flash of my true self surging forth. I brace for his judgement, the weight of it pressing against my thoughts.

But his response is softer than I dared hope—a warm paw brushing my arm, gentle reassurance in his touch. "It was only your second transformation in seven years," he murmurs, his tone a low echo of hope I dared not whisper to myself. "If you master your calm, perhaps it will be your last."

His fragile optimism glows between us, a lone candle in a vast chamber. I cradle it carefully, even as the shadow of my true self prowls at the edges of my mind. We sit in a hush that carries the hush of falling ash, until silence begins to fray under the burden of my secret.

When my father retires to bed, I slip from hearth-warmed comfort and teleport back to the Howls. I appear in a gasp of cool twilight, the plateau unfolding like an empty canvas beneath a bruised sky. The grass whispers around me, scented with dusk and distant rain. Across the expanse I see Galea—a small silhouette, her laughter drifting on the wind like a songbird's call. She is oblivious to the unseen pact that binds us.

I stand at the threshold of what I am and what I might become, feeling the world tighten around me, expectations weaving into a tapestry only I can see. These secrets, heavy as stones, are mine to carry—and for now, that is enough.

Chapter 24

Three years unfurl like shifting seasons—spring's green promise giving way to autumn's crimson farewell, only to renew again—while the world around us spins in a ceaseless dance of change and stasis. Galea ripens with every sunrise, her laughter a crystalline song that ripples through the air, and her beauty becomes a beacon that draws every gaze. Rensa's pursuit circles tighter, a predator closing on its prey with each passing day. Soon he is not alone; a glittering constellation of suitors gathers at her feet, their gazes brazen and unabashed. I stand at the edge of this whirlpool, equal parts witness and unwilling dancer, my heart drifting between familiarity and astonishment. Though three more years have worn themselves into my bones, I remain frozen at eighteen, suspended in amber while the world speeds by.

The constant clamour of flirtation clings to me like humid air, stifling and unrelenting. Beneath it lies the old sting of mockery—taunts hurled like sharpened stones—but I have grown calloused. The barbs still land, but they roll off my skin, their edges dulled by repetition and by my own stubborn resolve. I wear their laughter as a rough cloak, a mantle stitched from inevitability.

So much time yet remains before Galea will be old enough to stand in the role her parents envision—my Ama—and a hollow question gnaws at me: will she surrender her heart to another in the meantime? Or will I falter first? If love does not bind us, will her parents still decree our union? The uncertainty thrums through me like a restless heartbeat, an ache that refuses to rest.

One late afternoon, after the children's laughter has died to a distant echo, I appear in the doorway of Galea's class chamber. The air is heavy with the

faint scent of chalk and crayons, and the dust motes dance in the slanting light. Relief washes over me when I glimpse the empty desks—until I notice Rensa lurking in the corner, his posture rigid with purpose and desperation.

Then Galea appears, light spilling around her like the dawn. She rushes forwards, her small arms looping around me in a warm embrace, and for a moment the tension hissing between us dissolves. Rensa steps closer, his eyes narrowing to slits of malice. When he speaks, his voice is a blade honed on contempt. “My brother and sister told me you’re her daddy.”

Galea slips from my arms and meets my gaze, her eyes steady and bright. “He’s not,” she declares, each syllable ringing with certainty. Then she turns to Rensa, her tone gentle but unyielding: “But I’d be happy if he was. He takes such good care of me.”

For an instant, Rensa’s confidence falters, and I feel the weight of her hand in mine—a living tether that brings me fully into the moment. We step out together, leaving the quiet chamber behind, her small fingers entwined with mine.

As we emerge into the corridor’s pale glow, I feel the future unfurl before me like a vast, uncharted map. Its edges shimmer with promise and fear, and my heart thrums with the eager, tentative hope of the unknown.

Chapter 25

Eela and Karna drift through my days like earthbound shadows and wandering storms, their lives woven into mine with a gravity I cannot escape. Everywhere I turn I glimpse those emerald eyes—sparkling with equal measures of scorn and longing—trailing me like twin phantoms. Eela, barely twelve, wears her crush like a luminous badge; her gaze never falters, a bright beam that pins me in place. She hovers close, the persistence of a spring breeze curling around my ankles, her attention an unblinking flame. In the edges of my vision I catch the flash of her dark hair—liquid night cascading over slender shoulders—and a hopeful, haunting smile that twists the air with its sweetness. Karna is her mirror only in outline; in his depths burns a coiled resentment, a simmering storm that slices the space between us with the precision of a polished blade.

They seem to divine my every step, materialising beside me on the training ground as if drawn by some silent trumpet blast. In the gardens their soft footsteps rustle through petals and dew, always arriving just as I pause to

breathe. Even outside my father's chambers their spectres loom, a living tapestry of tension that drapes itself across my life. My true self—this loathsome, shadowed part of me—thrives in their presence, its dark whisper urging me to watch, to unravel the strange magnetism that binds us.

Then there is Melin, Talla's son, two years younger than the twins but fierce in his own devotion. His wide, adoring gaze gleams with innocent wonder, a pale moonlight at their battlefield of feelings. Eela regards him as a rival, and their rivalry unfolds like twin suns orbiting my world—an unspoken contest of laughter, glances, and thwarted triumphs, each vying for the gravity of my attention.

When their paths collide with mine, the air crackles. Eela's smile becomes a dare painted in rose and gold, Karna's glare a thunderhead pregnant with future reckoning. I stand at the epicentre of their storm, a reluctant idol sculpted by forces too vast and intricate to name.

Time here sways like a pendulum in high wind—years rushing past in a breath, yet my flesh holds fast at eighteen, a statue unmoved while the world spins in riotous change. The twins grow taller, their features sharpening into the promise of adulthood. Eela's crush blazes ever brighter, a furious bonfire that scorches the space between us; she flirts with a bold abandon that leaves me unnerved. Karna's contempt ripens alongside her ardour, a dark river carving deep channels through my thoughts. I taste his hatred on my tongue, sweet and acidic, and my true self drinks it down with greedy delight.

As trainees converge in mixed-age drills, Eela and Karna slip into my ranks. In every staff swing, every footwork drill, I feel their eyes—sharp as hunting hawks—measuring, probing. Eela's confidence is a vibrant stroke of colour against the muted battlefield; her laughter, a siren's call. Karna's hostility sits like thunder perched on the horizon, a storm gathering its might.

I have become their fixed point, the silent axis around which their fates spin. My true self watches with a fascination edged in obsession, keeping vigil over something I cannot yet name. And ever at the edge of perception hangs a weighty hush—an unseen shadow that promises revelation when the tapestry finally unwinds.

Chapter 26

The way Eela regards me feels like a sharp chord struck without warning, her gaze a silent punchline that leaves my ribs aching. Her lips curve into a

triumphantly smug smirk, as though she's already won before uttering a single word. "I think Elias would rather have a pretty girl on his arm," she purrs, her voice a honeyed blade that cuts through the chatter of the training ground. The syllables hang between us like jagged icicles, each one gleaming with challenge. "Not a clumsy boy."

Melin stands rooted before her, antlers crowned with spirals of ivy, tiny wildflowers, and dew-draped ferns—an ancient monument sprung to life. His face twists first into confusion, then pain, the moment Eela's insinuation sinks into him like poisoned arrows. I find myself holding my breath as his dark eyes lock onto mine, a silent plea trembling in their depths. Then, as though the very air around him has awakened, he begins to shift.

It isn't a violent upheaval but a gentle unfolding, as if the universe itself reshapes him to his truth. His broad shoulders narrow and soften, the sinew of his arms smoothing into lithe grace. The green of his robe ripples, settling into delicate folds around a new, slender form. Tiny crystals sprout along his antlers, catching the sunlight in a thousand secret promises. Where a young buck once stood, there now stands a doe: a figure of serene courage, her posture regal and unashamed.

"I am Melina," she declares, her voice a clear, confident melody. "Even if you can't love me the way I love you, I choose this."

Around us, the air thrums with Magence, a living tapestry of shifting colours and radiant motes of light. One by one, other trainees feel its pull: young men abandon their eager bows and petitions to the breeze and bloom into new forms—soft curves replace angular frames, hair tumbles in silken waves, and voices find a higher, sweeter pitch. Beside them, girls who once watched from the edges now step forwards, their own transformations born of envy, longing, and a fierce resolve to be seen. The training ground becomes a living kaleidoscope, each newly revealed self a petal in the riotous bloom of possibility.

Some who change shine with the certainty of discovery. "This feels right," they murmur to each other, their eyes bright with relief, as if their souls are greeting long-lost reflections. Others stand trembling at the thresholds of their new bodies, hesitant to take the first step into futures that glimmer like distant stars. Yet the magic weaves them all into its grand design, each shift a note in the swelling symphony of becoming.

Eela watches from the sidelines, her catlike green eyes glinting with both triumph and surprise. The scarlet of her robe flares against the crowd, a slash of defiance and delight. Her scheme, meant to humiliate, has instead ignited a cascade of transformation far beyond her cunning. Every newly minted boy and girl, man and woman, is both tribute to her provocation and testament to the stubborn power of hope.

Inside me, my true self stirs and revels in the glorious chaos. Its hunger pulses like a drumbeat, urging me to choose one or many.

All around, the world has become a kaleidoscope of bright hues and whispered revelations, every person at the centre of their own unfolding story. I tell my true self I will choose no one.

I turn my gaze back to Melina. She glides across the training ground with a dancer's poise, each step a careful choreography of self-acceptance. Her eyes meet mine with the same unwavering intensity they held before, but there is now a gentle calmness behind them—a quiet peace born of courageous truth.

Then I feel the gentle thrum of my father's mind, a familiar warmth that draws me back to the softer rhythms of home. Grateful for the moment of respite, I turn away from the vibrant tumult, leaving the training ground's humming expanse behind. Melina's gaze follows me—soft, steadfast—tracing my retreat like a shadow woven of hope and new beginnings.

Chapter 27

The air around us thrums with raw tension, each breath tasting of dust and anticipation. Karna's challenge hangs in the heat between us, his eyes twin embers burning with unyielding intent. Overseeing the confrontation, Darm stands like an ancient sentinel, his broad shoulder a bastion of calm amid the rising storm. "Physical weapons only," he declares, and his voice reverberates across the training ground like a distant thunderclap. Around us, the trainees form a tightening ring, their eager gazes glinting in the late-afternoon light, as if their very hunger for spectacle breathes life into the air.

Karna's exhalation rumbles low in his chest, a beast's growl before the hunt. He lunges at me with terrifying abandon, his massive axe cleaving the sky, its blade shimmering in promise of blood. The world slows for a heartbeat as metal cleaves the air—then I move. My body becomes fluid poetry, each step a careful curve that evades his wrath. My staff arcs in a smooth crescent of

polished wood, and with a final, decisive motion I press its tip to his throat. The force is gentle but absolute: the duel is over before it truly began.

Karna collapses to the sandy earth with a muted thud, eyes wide, chest heaving in shock. A ripple of laughter—sharp, bright, unstoppable—ripples through the circle of onlookers. My true self drinks in their amusement like fine wine, savouring the harsh sweetness of his humiliation as it blossoms on my tongue.

Turning away in a moment of unguarded trust—naïve, hopeful—I sense a sudden wave of heat at my back. A fireball streaks towards me in a furious arc, its core roaring with incandescent rage. Brilliant light fractures the air, and I barely have time to twist before spinning a jet of water from my palm. The two elements collide with a sizzling hiss, erupting in a cloud of scalding steam. Karna stands drenched, clothing clinging to him, droplets of water tracing cold rivulets down his furious scowl.

The laughter surges again, louder this time, a tidal wave of mirth that washes over him, drowning his fury in every mocking peal. His green eyes narrow to lethal slits, venomous hatred coiling behind them as he prepares to strike once more. But before he can lift his axe, Darm is there: a massive paw drifts onto Karna's shoulder, firm and immovable. "Enough," the bear intones, his voice an iron bar across the field of conflict. "You will see Leera."

In an instant the world blurs and tilts, reality unravelling in a dizzying dance of Magence, and then—silence. Darm and Karna vanish as though blown away by unseen winds, leaving me alone in the centre of an empty circle. The trainees' laughter still echoes in my ears, a haunting symphony of disbelief and wonder.

I linger in the hush, watching dust motes drift through the golden shafts of dying light. Robes swirl as the trainees slip away, their eyes cast back in curious wonder, unspoken questions swirling around me like restless spirits. My very presence here is a fracture in their understanding, and I feel that truth press against my mind—heavy, insistent, unrelenting.

Their curiosity is a bright, insistent echo that reverberates inside me, tugging at the edges of my own questions. This is how it begins, I realise, the thought flaring like a comet across an ink-black sky. This is how it begins—and I stand at its heart, a single point of light in their weave of fear and fascination.

Leera will suppress his Magence, I think with a small, silent satisfaction. Perhaps she will calm his fury as well, though I suspect that even her power has its limits.

My true self revels in the turbulence of their emotions, drinking them in like nectar. I am both within their circle and forever beyond it, a gulf as vast as the space between stars yawning at my back.

Above me, the sun dips towards the horizon, streaking the sky with molten gold and deepening indigo. The colours bleed into one another like wet paint on a canvas, each stroke deliberate and finite. Night—and all its endless mysteries—stretches before me, a boundless landscape I ache to explore.

A sudden longing for Galea tugs at my thoughts, insistent as the call of the wind. Without hesitation, I yield to it. In a blink, the world shifts, and I stand on the familiar plateau of the Howls. The sharp scents of pine and distant rain welcome me, a soothing balm to my restless mind.

There she is—Galea, all eight years of her joyful exuberance. Her wings unfold behind her in jubilant arcs, each feather alight with childish delight. “Lias!” she cries, her voice a melody of pure welcome. “Fly with me!”

I return her smile, warm and sure, and she takes my hand. Together we lift into the sky. The wind roars past, a joyous roar that drowns all doubt. Below us the world slips into a living mosaic of greens and shadows. Wings beating in perfect unison, we soar beyond the reach of gravity—and for one breathless heartbeat, I believe I have found where I truly belong.

Chapter 28

They come for me like twin storms, an unrelenting, two-pronged advance that hammers my chest until I can barely draw breath. Eela’s presence blazes through my vision in shocking scarlet flashes—each footstep a spark that sets my pulse racing—while Melina surrounds me in a soft, shimmering green glow, like sunlight filtered through dew-drenched leaves. Together they bleed colour into every corner of my world, staining my mind with their urgent pursuit. I feel their desires coiling around me, a tightening noose of want that leaves no space for quiet thought.

Melina’s courtship drifts in on a gentle breeze. Her voice is a silken melody, light and hopeful, trailing behind her words like the lingering echo of a songbird at dawn. When she catches my eye, her gaze is shy but earnest,

only a whisper of longing hidden in the depths of her brown irises. Her antlers—slender, polished—brush against my shoulder in a careless caress that feels both accidental and deliberate, sending a tremor of warmth that lingers long after she moves away.

Eela approaches like wildfire. Her steps are bold, each one a promise of heat and hunger. She studies me with fierce, unwavering intensity—green eyes burning brighter than embers—and her words fall against my ear like a scorching breath. “You won’t last against me,” she murmurs, a low dare vibrating in the space between us, her tone a blade of certainty that carves straight through my defences.

Driven to desperation, I plead my betrothal as though it were a fragile shield. I speak only of a promise I made—of a name I cannot utter—hoping the weight of that secret will force them back. The confession hangs in the air like smoke, twisting and curling, its true shape obscured even to me.

Melina’s eyes widen, surprise igniting like wildflowers before softening into tentative hope. “You don’t really want her—or him?” Her words drift out as a question, fragile and trembling, as though she’s testing whether belief might take root.

Eela’s laughter cuts through the hesitation, a crystalline arrow aimed straight at my heart. “Not for long,” she insists, leaning in so her breath warms my cheek. The promise of her smile, sharp and certain, leaves no room for doubt.

My ploy fails utterly. They redouble their efforts, as ceaseless as the tide beating against the riverbank. I am caught in their current, a flotsam adrift on a river of desire.

Days stretch into weeks, slippery and unsteady, slipping through my fingers like water. They shadow me in every corridor, colour every thought, pound at the walls of my concentration when I train or study. Melina’s tokens arrive each dawn: bouquets of wildflowers—violet bells, pale blue morning glories—lying at my threshold, their heady scent seeping into my chambers like a quiet plea. Eela’s pursuit is brazen as sunlight, her voice echoing in the spaces between my thoughts, her laughter lingering like heat against my skin long after she’s gone.

I drift, weighed down by the gravity of their attention. Each sunrise paints them into my world anew—Eela’s scarlet fire, Melina’s green hush—until I wonder if

escape is even possible. The thought coils around me, both a comforting promise and an iron cage, tightening with every breath I take.

Chapter 29

The sky above the plateau stretches like an endless wash of pale blue and gold, the morning sun brushing every tuft of grass and jagged stone with molten light. A warm breeze carries the scent of dry earth and distant blossoms, weaving through our nostrils and stirring the hairs along our arms. All around us, the herd stands in hushed anticipation, tails flicking, ears pricked, as two figures break from the throng and launch into the air together. Their wings beat in powerful, measured strokes that drive them higher in wide, looping arcs. The sound—a soft thunder of feathers—echoes against the rocky crags, and for a moment the world seems suspended between each rise and fall of their bodies.

At my side, ten-year-old Galea stands motionless, her vivid green eyes reflecting the soaring pair as if trying to trap them within her own wonder. Her wavy white hair ripples in the breeze; the wildflowers I wove into it earlier still fresh and bright. Hope and curiosity bloom in her features, making her look almost too large for her slender frame, as though her very spirit might lift her from the earth.

My chest tightens. I can feel that familiar coil of dread and longing wind itself through my thoughts. Loka's voice still rings in my ears—stern, unbending, a chain I cannot break: You are a member of this herd.

Above us, the pair dwindles to tiny silhouettes, fragile yet unfaltering, dancing towards the gleaming horizon. Beyond lies the Crystal Glade—my forbidden hope—its trees dripping with gemlike dew. I swallow hard, tasting the weight of secrets on my tongue.

Galea tugs my sleeve and guides me a few paces aside. Her excitement coils in the air between us, impossible to resist.

“Do you think my parents have chosen my future Ama yet?” Her voice, soft but insistent, carries a melody of yearning that tugs at my resolve.

Her question rings in my skull, each note a glimmer of truth I'm afraid to voice. I close my eyes against the brilliance of the plateau, breathe in the dust and pollen swirling on the wind. I see my father's face in that light—his gentle frown, the crease by his brow where worry always gathers. I feel again the

tremor in his voice when I told him my secret, the warmth of his acceptance staining my memories with relief. And then the bear: its shaggy pelt slick with dawn dew, its dying breath a cold whisper slipping from my hands like smoke. That moment shadows me still, a mirror of the self I dare not show.

The words catch in my throat, coiling like a serpent I'm loath to free. Yet when I meet her unwavering gaze—so open, so trusting—I know I cannot turn away. My voice emerges, tentative as a fledgeling's first cry: "They... chose me after the bear."

Her face blooms like a sunrise. Joy, pure and unsullied, floods her features—her lips part in a bright curve, her shoulders relax, and her laughter ripples through the air like wind over water.

"It's what I've always wanted," she breathes, as simple and perfect as a single drop of rain quenching a parched land.

Her elation seeps into me, loosening the iron grip of my doubts. The wind shifts, carrying away some of my fear, and for the first time since the day I witnessed the bear's last breath, I feel warmth stir in my chest.

Around us, the plateau hums with life—crickets trill in the tall grasses, the herd's low murmurs rise and fall like far-off waves, and the sky, wide and welcoming, seems to lean closer. We sit together on a sun-warmed rock, her small hand finding mine. I resist the urge to speak of the Glade—its beauty too heavy, its promise too dangerous for her young heart. Instead, I let this moment stand: two souls tethered by hope, gazing towards a future as vast and open as the sky itself.

A gentle breeze sweeps over us, carrying whispers of untold stories through the grasses. Behind me, the past weaves its tapestry of secrets and shadows. Before us, the horizon beckons—an uncharted realm of light and possibility. And for the first time, I allow myself to believe that we might soar into it together.

Chapter 30

The truth of our betrothal blooms across the Tower like a wildflower on the wind, its petals impossible to catch or contain. It came out not long after I told her; the world now knows the secret I thought I might never share. But Galea is free of secrets, and it seems our match is now common knowledge, even to those who would rather not know. I should be shocked, perhaps, at the speed

with which it spread, but my heart is light, unburdened by the weight of silence.

In an instant, the world shears into a whirlwind of colour and cacophony, a maelstrom that churns with breathtaking velocity, and I am abruptly transported to the Crystal Glade with the twins. Eela and Karna, 15 years old, stand amidst the tumultuous symphony, their eyes saucers of wonder laced with fear. I can do naught but observe as my true self towers over them, a spectre that throbs with an insistent, inexorable directive.

"Confess to each other," it commands, each word a razor's edge slicing through the air. "Share your truest feelings."

The twins waver, their emotions a labyrinthine knot that tethers them in doubt. Yet, my true self is an incessant force, a deluge that batters against their fragile defences. I sense their determination begin to fracture, the burden of their silent truths bearing down with an urgent, irrefutable pressure.

Eela is the first to surrender, her voice a quivering, unveiled emotion. "I love you," she admits, her words a luminous, shattering revelation that lingers between them like a gossamer bridge. Her gaze locks onto Karna's, a fervent, imploring search for the reciprocation she has yearned for.

His reply is a heart's throb away, a torrent of feeling that mirrors her own. "I love you too," he declares, his voice a tapestry of conviction and respite that permeates the air between them. The universe pauses, a fleeting, eternal moment crystallised in time.

Then, they are entwined, the chasm between them imploding like celestial bodies drawn together by an irresistible force. Their kiss is a spark that kindles, a blaze of inevitability that sears with the ardour of words left unsaid and longings concealed. I watch as their robes drift away, the vivid crimson a stark, startled contrast against the verdant, velvety carpet of the Glade, a vivid tableau that echoes the intensity of their union.

Their forms are a study in juxtaposition, a terrain of luminescence, pallor, and gentle curves. Eela arches over Karna, her raven tresses a cascade that grazes his skin like a clandestine whisper. Time slows to a solitary, breathless interlude as she astrides him with movements fluid and purposeful, each motion a meticulous, sensuous choreography.

Karna's hand emanates a Magence glow as he employs the ancient technique, a safeguard against conception.

Eela then unites them, their bond a resplendent, impossible phenomenon that tethers them eternally with the constancy of a vow. Their rhythm is a harmonious dance, a cadence that is both impassioned and languid, a melody that has forever resonated with the familiarity of an eternal bond, each resonant note a testament to their love's fortitude and perpetuity.

I am both within and without, the void between us as vast as the chasm from earth to sky. My true self observes with a voracious, unquenchable craving, its contentment a sombre, pulsating entity. Their love unfurls again and again, an intricate dance that imbues the Glade with the radiant, vibrant essence of their ardour.

I am left to ponder the enigma of my true self's motives, the rationale behind its relentless coercion to entangle their emotions. Yet, as I witness their love's certitude unfurl like the blossom of an elusive, ethereal flower, the query lingers—a haunting, persistent reverberation I cannot dismiss.

Chapter 31

The air is an opulent symphony of scent and sound, a lavish tapestry woven with the essence of night-blooming flowers and the hushed lullaby of leaves dancing in the Tower gardens. I traverse this sensory feast as I often do, the cool breeze a tender caress against the day's fiery embrace, when I happen upon the twins in an intimate embrace. They are bare, a vivid tableau of motion and desperate ardour against the shadowy, whispering canvas. Eela is positioned on her hands and knees, like a creature of myth, ready to take flight, while Karna moves within her from behind, his face a study in feral concentration and urgent need.

Time seems to pause as I turn to retreat, the moment a fragile bubble of uncertainty, but Eela's voice suspends me, a silvery, insistent melody that slices through the air with the precision of a sharpened blade. "Don't go," she implores, her words a luminous, audacious plea that sparkles in the gloaming.

Karna's voice is a ragged echo, breathless and urgent. "We didn't have the opportunity to thank you yesterday."

I hesitate, their invitation a sudden, ponderous weight. Their crescendo is a shared, cataclysmic release, a wild, breathless aria that floods the gardens

with its piercing, insistent refrain. Eela's cry is a radiant, soaring thing, a zenith that lances the night and sends them both spiralling into paroxysms of ecstasy. Karna gasps her name, the sound a soft, fractured echo that entwines them, binding them in a lovers' embrace.

I hear the rustle of fabric as the twins don their robes, and then they are beside me. "We wanted to thank you for not reporting us to the High Council," Eela says, her voice a sweet, earnest melody. "I also wanted to apologise for my flirtations. I only did it because I was trying to resist Karna."

"And I only tormented you because I was terrified of losing Eela to you," Karna confesses, his voice a low, sincere rumble. "I actually respect you."

"We know that our love is forbidden," Eela explains, her eyes reflecting the silvery moonlight. "But we've been in love since we were twelve. We couldn't resist the tide of our feelings. We yearned to first express our love physically after reading the Book of Love at fourteen. We're deeply grateful to you for your understanding."

"It was my true self who understood," I reply softly. "I was unaware of the depth of your feelings for each other."

"Well, we're grateful to you both," Karna says, his voice steady and sure. "We hope we can trust in your continued discretion."

"It's none of my business," I reply gently. "But yes, you can." Overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, I teleport away, leaving the gardens and the twins behind in a swirl of stardust and shadow.

Chapter 32

Galea waits for me with the first blush of dawn, her presence a bright thread woven into the tapestry of the morning. As I approach, she bounces on her heels, energy radiating from her like the warmth of a midday sun. Her wings stretch behind her in gleaming arcs, each feather catching the light in a kaleidoscope of colours. I feel a tightening in my chest, a mixture of anticipation and wonder as I clutch my gifts.

"Happy birthday," I murmur, my voice catching on the soft morning air. I place a crystalline owl in her waiting hands, its delicate facets splitting the dim light into sudden rainbows. She holds it to her chest, as fragile and beautiful as the promise forced upon us by her parents. "And this," I add, my voice as tentative

as my hope, “is a special gift.” I hand her a package wrapped in pale linen and tied with silken thread.

She unties the thread with nimble fingers, her curiosity electric. A dress spills from the folds—soft, shimmering fabric in muted pinks and golds. I feel a tremor of nerves, a tight coil of anticipation, as she examines it with wide-eyed wonder. “It’s exquisite,” she whispers, the words a quiet exhalation of joy. She looks up, her expression a mixture of surprise and gratitude. “Thank you—it’s like nothing I’ve ever worn!”

“I asked Talla to make it for you,” I say, the memory of the bipedal doe’s workshop bright and vivid. “I thought you might like something a little more… feminine, now that you’re thirteen.”

Her expression blooms with delight, a radiant promise that eases the weight of my unspoken fears. She envelops me in a quick embrace, her warmth a reminder of all that lies ahead. “Wait here,” she calls over her shoulder, her voice a bright echo, and then she disappears into her chamber.

For a moment, I am alone with my thoughts. The air is thick with the scent of honeysuckle, and I feel the press of time like a living thing—each beat a reminder of the secrets that bind me. My heart stutters at the thought of what her future holds, and I wonder if I can live with Loka and Shayli’s decision. The uncertainty gnaws at me, an insistent hunger that I cannot sate.

When Galea returns, the dress cascades around her like a waterfall of spun light. She is more beautiful than I imagined, and the sight sends a shiver through me, a shock of emotion I cannot name. Before I can speak, she turns her back, her intention clear. I weave wildflowers into her hair, hands moving with careful reverence.

“There,” I say, stepping back to admire my work. She spins to face me, and the sight is a gentle assault—an impossibly lovely thing that leaves me breathless. Her new dress clings to her form with a grace and elegance that takes me by surprise. Underneath it, the girl I have known all these years blossoms into someone new and unexpected. My heart stumbles over itself, a mad, blushing creature.

Galea sees my reaction, and her laughter spills through the morning air like music. She moves close, her lips pressing a bright kiss to my cheek—a quicksilver brush that leaves me warm and unsteady. “You like it,” she declares with a knowing smile, and there’s something in her voice, a new and

unfurling confidence, that makes me wonder at the paths stretching out before us.

"Yes," I manage, my voice a threadbare whisper. "I do."

Galea's lips then meet mine with a gentle touch. Her kiss is the softest whisper, a delicate brush of lips that lingers just long enough to send a shiver through me, as though she's carefully testing my reaction, gauging the unspoken response in the air between us.

It takes me by surprise, and I feel the familiar stir of my true self, its dark delight curling around my racing thoughts. Before I can react, Galea pulls back with a soft, airy laugh, as though she's amazed by her own courage.

"Breakfast?" she suggests, her tone light and unburdened by the weight of what's just occurred. She studies my flushed face and dazed expression. "Or would you like to try that again first?" she asks.

I am blinking, unsure how the world has so abruptly shifted beneath my feet. I open my mouth, maybe to protest, maybe to say that I have never kissed anyone and do not know what to do, but before any words assemble themselves Galea is laughing again and catching my hand in hers, pulling me closer.

Her fingers caress my cheek, a bright tether that cinches the distance between us. She tips her head, drawing near. I brace for another brush of her lips, bracing too for the hunger stirring within, but this time she hesitates—a heartbeat of pause that seems to drag the world with it.

"Like this," she breathes, her voice a hush so intimate that it seems to plait the air between us into a single living cord. With careful deliberation she sets her hands on either side of my jaw, thumbs grazing the hot pulse at my neck. Her lips find mine again, the contact longer, more searching, and I feel a tremor in my legs as though the ground itself has come alive. Her touch is tender, tentative, and I am stunned by the soft urgency of it, the tidal pull of emotions I thought I alone harboured.

This time, I surprise her back. My hands rise to her shoulders, then one slips to the curve of her waist and I pull her in, matching her kiss with a gentle press of my own.

Galea's whole body seems to relax at this small act of bravery. Her wings come down in a soft rustle, as though she's been holding them rigid in her

own anticipation, and her lips press harder, bolder, a new and stunning confidence in the way she melts into my touch. And I, who have never once been drawn to the idea of kissing or being kissed, discover that the world has been keeping a secret from me: that a kiss could be pure Magence, lightning running through every nerve, or more subtle—like the tremble of water along a crystal glass, threatening to overflow with every heartbeat.

When we break apart, she shivers and laughs at the same time, her cheeks gone the wild pink of sunrise. “I’d say ‘happy birthday to me,’ but that was very much a gift for both of us.” Her hands linger at my jaw, thumbs tracing idle circles as though savouring the contours of new territory. “Did you like it?” she asks, voice dipping as though truly curious.

It takes me a moment to remember how to breathe. “Yes,” I manage, and this time my voice is a full, unhesitant note. “I did.”

She beams, a burst of colour and warmth that leaves me stunned, and draws me closer again. This time she’s quicker, more playful, her kiss a light, teasing touch that lingers for a split-second before she lets me go again, laughing at my surprise. “Now breakfast,” she declares, fingers threading through mine.

Chapter 33

Days spill into weeks, and the weeks are crowded with plans. There are moments when Galea's excitement seems to surpass even my own, as we sit together plotting and dreaming through the long afternoons. I offer a thousand different futures, drawing them in bright strokes with my words, and she sweeps her hand through the air to erase each one. “I just want to be with you,” she insists, her certainty a force that leaves me lightheaded.

The more time I spend with Galea, the more I see the woman she is becoming. The girl I’ve known so long glimmers beneath each new layer, the same fierce and joyous spirit now deepened with a mysterious, alluring grace. I feel the pull of her, an inescapable current that tugs at the edges of my resolve, and I wonder if the promises we’ve made are enough to hold us steady. My fears cast long shadows, but she steps into them fearlessly, lighting each one with her bright conviction.

When she is fourteen, I ask her to join me in my study. The air is warm with summer, heavy with the wild scent of honeysuckle, and I feel it close around us as I guide her to the polished wooden desk. I hesitate, the weight of my hopes and fears a knot I can’t untie. I see the question in her eyes and take a

deep breath, summoning my courage. "This is for you," I say, my voice a half-whisper, and I place the Book of Love before her.

She looks down at its intricate cover, then up at me, and I see something new flicker in her gaze—a mixture of curiosity, anticipation, and an unexpected touch of shyness. "You're not old enough for the physical side yet," I begin, thoughts tangling with caution and care. "But Maginist children learn about this at fourteen. You should too." Her eyes widen, but she grips the book steadily. "I want you to know everything," I murmur, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. "So nothing will be a surprise."

She nods, a quick, decisive motion, and I step back, to give her space—her small figure hunched over the book, the afternoon light pooling around her like liquid gold. Her focus is complete, and I watch as she becomes absorbed in the words and pictures that once shocked me into silence. She reads the book cover to cover, her concentration unwavering, and when she reaches the section on physical intimacy I see her pause.

Galea's eyes lift from the page, and I brace for the torrent of questions she must have. But the words that spill from her leave me breathless in a different way. "Elias," she says, her voice a bright tether that pulls me closer, "when two people are right for each other, is it really painless?"

I nod, trying to find my own voice. She leans back, her lips curved in a thoughtful smile. "Then why do we have to wait until I'm sixteen?"

The question hangs between us, alive and fluttering. I meet her gaze, the intensity of it like a pulse against my skin. "It's the minimum age. There are some who indulge sooner, although they shouldn't because they're not mature enough, but that's only when they're both underage. You and I must wait. For us, it would be wrong. I'd risk exile, leaving you alone and unable to take another mate," I reply, my voice a thin thread. "But... we can wait longer, if you're uncertain."

She shakes her head, the motion quick and sure. "I'm not," she insists. Her eyes are clear and bright, a reflection of the resolve I see growing in her heart. She looks back at the book, tracing a finger over the illustrations with a thoughtful frown.

"Can you change the pictures?" she asks, her tone curious rather than hesitant. "So they show the two of us instead of strangers?"

The request catches me by surprise, and I hesitate. She sees the doubt shadow my face and leans forwards, her expression daring and mischievous. “Unless you’re afraid to,” she murmurs, the words a gentle challenge.

With an effort, I conjure the images she wants. My face flares with heat as they unfold in vivid clarity. She watches, fascinated, and by the time I’m done, I am certain she’ll be shocked into silence. But there is nothing but delight in her expression, as though she’s just seen the most wonderful, impossible thing.

She meets my gaze with a smile that sends my heart tumbling over itself. “I can’t wait,” she whispers, and the words spill into the air like a promise.

I feel the tight coil of my worries begin to unwind, its hold loosening as she reaches across the desk to close the distance between us. “Do you still want to be with me?” I ask, unable to keep the tremor from my voice. “Even after seeing all that?”

Galea’s eyes soften, and her warmth wraps around me, a bright and steady glow. “I love you, Elias,” she replies, each word a beacon in the gathering dusk. “More than ever.”

She sees the way I hesitate, the way my own words tangle in my throat and stall on the edge of my tongue. Her small, knowing smile is almost too much to bear. “What is it?” she asks, her voice a gentle invitation. “What do you want to say?”

My heart pounds in my chest, a wild and skittering thing. The words have been shackled to my fears, but I see now that there is nothing to hold them back. They fall from my lips like stars, blazing trails in the dark: “I love you too.”

Her hands reach for mine, and I feel the world shift beneath me, realigning with the force of her quiet faith. She pulls me around the desk, and I fold into her embrace, the shape of it so familiar yet so new. Together we drift into a golden, uncharted future, its edges bright with possibility.

“Can our first time be on my sixteenth birthday?” she asks, her voice a melodic rush. “I don’t see why we should wait any longer when we don’t have to.” Her boldness leaves me reeling, the floor unsteady beneath my feet.

“All right,” I agree, my breath catching in my throat. A tangle of fear and elation blooms inside me, a wild, beautiful thing I can barely contain.

Chapter 34

The world shimmers around me in fractals of colour and possibility, spinning like stained glass caught in sunlight, as I explain to my father how my bond with Galea has deepened. His eyes soften, and for a moment the golden glow of the hearth seems to catch in his brown fur. Then, in a voice as gentle as dawn's first breeze and as firm as oak, he offers a suggestion that settles over me like a drawn curtain: "You should move to the plateau. You needn't, of course, but you might find yourself happier there."

The notion unfolds inside me with the force of sunrise and the hush of twilight—an exhilarating terror that stretches wider than any horizon I've known. I feel myself become a river of conflicting currents: excitement rippling alongside tremors of fear, hopes bobbing like fallen petals in a swirling eddy of uncertainty. Yet beneath the tumult I sense a steady heartbeat of promise, a quiet hum that pulses with the thrill of uncharted discovery.

"Perhaps," I murmur at last, the two syllables thick with everything I cannot yet fathom. Still, its shape glows before me like a new constellation, bright and alive in the dark spaces between my doubts.

I set out for the plateau, stepping onto its vast expanse as though crossing into another realm. The grass beneath my boots is a living carpet of green, flecked with dew that glitters like a scattering of tiny stars. Above me, the sky stretches in endless swathes of cerulean and pale gold, a vaulted dome that seems to promise wonders I have yet to name. My thoughts chase themselves in circles—what will Galea think of my decision? Will she feel at home with me so close?

I want her to love it more than anything.

The sentinel trees along the rim guide me with silent wisdom. Their trunks are mottled with lichen; their roots knot the earth in gentle insistence. They part to reveal a hidden clearing where a broad, glass-smooth pond mirrors the sky. At its heart floats a little island, carpeted in soft grass, crowned by a single oak whose great branches reach outwards like an invitation.

Perfection radiates from that tree—a whisper of peace that stills the whirlwind in my chest. Gathering my Magence into a bright shimmer, I step into the air, and in an instant I stand upon the grassy isle. The world snaps into focus in a panorama of hope, every blade of grass and ripple in the water infused with possibility.

I close my eyes, opening the floodgates of my power. The oak responds as though it breathes with me, its ancient limbs bowing gracefully. From living wood, windows blossom—arched portals framed in bark, their panes clear as morning dew. A door forms, solid and welcoming, wood grain swirling with natural patterns that glow from within.

Because the oak stands atop a gentle rise, I coax a flight of steps into being, hewn of living wood and moss. A short path leads from the top of the steps to the threshold. Around me, the air hums with creation's energy, as though the world itself is celebrating this new beginning.

I step back and survey my work: a home grown from the heart of the tree, perfectly entwined with the land. The oak rises proudly, its leaves rustling in a soft applause. In that instant, I feel the steady pull of certainty anchoring me to this place—and to the bright, uncharted promise of all that lies ahead.

Chapter 35

The sun hangs overhead like a golden sentinel, its brilliant gaze pouring warmth across the corridor as I wait outside Galea's class chamber. Its light stretches long, trembling shadows that drift through the day's tapestry like silken threads. Nearby, Rensa lurks—his brow knotted, lips pressed into a dark line of disapproval that stains the air, jarring against the bright trill of children's laughter echoing through the halls.

The moment the door swings open, Galea bursts forth, her small frame alight with exhilaration. She dashes to me, her dress swirling, her excitement a buoyant breeze lifting me clear of Rensa's oppressive scowl.

"He's still upset about our betrothal," she murmurs, her voice low and conspiratorial, a secret blossoming between us. Then she presses her lips to mine—soft, certain, a kiss that threads warmth through my veins and anchors me to this moment.

I feel her words coil around my heart, tugging at the edges of every doubt. Drawing a deep breath, I smile shyly. "I have a surprise for you." The promise unfurls between us like a ribbon of sunlight.

We exit the Tower and with a shared leap, we take to the sky. Wings beat in a rush of wind; the world below blurs into ribbons of green and gold. Birds wheel around us in cheerful chorus, the plateau rising to meet us like a welcoming friend.

We alight in the clearing I'd claimed. Our feet touch the soft grass with a breathless hush. Galea's gaze flicks to the old oak in the centre—a towering, gnarled sentinel I'd hollowed and shaped for us. Her eyes widen, shining like twin moons.

"It's...wonderful," she breathes, voice trembling with joy, each word a delicate bloom in the quiet.

I take her hand and guide her beneath the threshold I'd shaped: a door set into living bark that swings open to reveal our future. Inside, the main chamber stretches wide and hospitable, its beam-carved walls bathed in lantern light. Garlands of fresh laurel hang above a fireplace, where Magence-produced flames provide warmth when it's cold and entertainment when it's not.

Beyond, the kitchen chamber beckons—a snug nook with a stone hearth, clay jars of spices lined along the shelves, and woven baskets brimming with ripening fruit. The scent of thyme and rosemary lingers, a silent vow of shared dinners and whispered stories at day's end.

We move on to the dining chamber, where a sturdy table of oak waits below a window that frames the sky; then the study, its curved walls lined with places to stow parchment and quills, ready for dreams to be inked into plans. Next comes the bathchamber, steam-touched and fragrant with lavender, its deep crystal basin poised to cradle two bodies in warm repose.

At last, I lead her to my bedchamber, where soft rugs carpet the floor and gauzy curtains frame a window to the skies. Heart pounding like distant drums, I reveal the identical chamber beyond—her bedchamber, with linens of pale rose and pillows as soft as cloudscape.

"You can sleep here sometimes," I whisper, offering the space and more—for permanence, for home.

Her eyes burn bright with resolve. "I want to stay over tonight," she declares, voice firm as a promise carved in stone.

Later, her parents—standing at the door in gentle approval—nod their consent. The world seems to hum with quiet wonder. Over a simple dinner of roasted root vegetables and fresh bread, we share laughter and soft confession, the candles flickering in time with our hearts.

When night deepens to velvet, I hear the gentle click of my bedchamber door. Galea slips inside, moonlight tracing her silhouette. She climbs into bed beside me, the linens rustling like leaves in a midnight breeze.

“You were too far away,” she murmurs, curling against me, her warmth closing every distance.

I fumble a protest, my words fragile as dew on morning grass—but they melt under her steady gaze. We drift to sleep wrapped in one another’s arms, the sky above an open promise, stars shimmering like distant mirrors of our bright, hopeful future.

Chapter 36

The horizon tilts and spins in a whirl of dust and golden light, and I find myself swept along in its relentless orbit. Each morning I wake on the windswept plateau still half-lost between the steady hum of a life once ruled by the Tower’s looming shadow and the vast openness that now stretches before me. The plateau’s air is thin and clear, carrying the taste of stone and sage, and I breathe deeply as I learn its unfamiliar rhythms. The absence of the Tower feels like a missing limb—a hollow where its bright form once loomed above me—but the freedom it affords is at once exhilarating and terrifying.

Gone are the constant watchful presences of Eela and Karna. Their laughter no longer drifts on the breeze, their footprints no longer press damp into the earth. I feel their memory as a distant echo, like voices calling from across a canyon. In their place stands Galea, a living ember at my side. When dawn’s first light filters through the windows of our treehouse, I often find her curled beside me, her warmth a gentle, grounding force that tethers me to this new reality. Her breath is steady against my neck like a lullaby of promise; her pulse hums through the floor like quiet music in my veins.

The others—those who still whisper of politics and power—believe the twins have abandoned me to pursue seats on the High Council. They imagine Eela and Karna charting a course towards influence, eyes fixed on grand ambitions, and they suspect I have become a pawn in their designs. But only the three of us—and the truest part of my soul—know how fiercely I guard the secret that binds the twins together: a love bright and unbreakable, woven of stolen glances and midnight confessions. It is a fragile thing, yet heavy as iron, and sometimes its weight settles in my chest like a stone I cannot shift.

I still puzzle over the reason my true self forced them to confront what they had long refused to name. Every enquiry meets only silent echoes—a vast, unyielding absence at the core of my being, like staring up at the endless sky and finding only void.

Over the next two years, Galea and I grow ever closer. Our bond threads itself through each day: in the curl of her fingers around mine, in the quiet song of her laughter beneath the open sky, in the soft press of her shoulder against my own when the wind howls across the plateau. She is balm to my uncertainty, a living promise that tomorrow holds more than the weight of my doubts.

But Rensa remains a relentless presence, his pursuit like the drawn arc of a predator circling its prey. I see the green glow in his eyes, the dark coils of envy that tighten his gaze whenever he looks at me—and at Galea. My deeper self whispers the truth: his hunger is a consuming fire, a furious belief that Galea's heart can be bent to his will. He does not understand the depth of our bond, the simple, shining certainty of it.

Soon Galea will turn fifteen, and already I feel the tremor of her unspoken question pulsing between us: the promise of love, of flesh joined in the hush of night, of hearts laid bare. It is a bright, unyielding line stretching across the landscape of my hopes—and of my fears. For within me lurks the ghost of the bear, a dark shape that coils around my will, that whispers of claws and primal ferocity. The thought of transformation, even for a heartbeat, is a terror that winds through my mind like a serpent of doubt.

And yet when I look at Galea—when I feel her steady heartbeat beneath my hand and see the unwavering faith shining in her eyes—the grip of my fear loosens. I have known danger all my life: the shadow of my truest self is a familiar companion. But I have never loved like this. Love, I realise at last, is a sudden and unexpected dawn, flooding every dark crevice with light. It is the fragile certainty that tomorrow will come and find us still together.

So I draw in a shuddering breath and let the world continue its dizzying spin. I can do this, I decide—my voice a small flame in the vast night. The future may press in around me, a relentless force, but it draws me not into darkness but into the bright, inevitable shape of the life we will share.

Chapter 37

The world before me shimmers in a riot of light and sound, and I stand at its very heart. Dawn's first golden shafts spill over the rim of the plateau, setting the dewy grasses ablaze in green and amber. It is Galea's sixteenth birthday, and all around us the herd gathers to witness. I can feel the collective gaze of dozens of pairs of eyes—bright, expectant, charged with the hum of ancient tradition—as my father and Leera stand beside me, the only outsiders Loka and Shayli have allowed to witness this rite.

A breeze carries the sharp tang of wildflowers and warmed earth, curling through the folds of Galea's dress, which Talla has woven from the finest silks. Every thread shimmers like spun light, and against the vast blue sky her wings are filigree lace—gossamer arcs of pearlescent white. I wear my ceremonial robe, heavy with embroidered runes that whisper of family and fate. The weight of it presses into my shoulders and reminds me of everything this moment demands: courage, trust, surrender.

Loka and Shayli step forwards in unison, their faces calm as undisturbed water. Shayli's golden wings and tail glitter in the sunrise; Loka's dark eyes shine with gentle certainty. Side by side, they give Galea the slightest, insistent nudge, as if guiding a fledgeling to the edge of the nest. And suddenly, the world tilts on its axis, alive with possibility.

Benna's presence steadies me. He nudges my leg—a solid touch like warm stone—and my heart, thundering like a drum, finds a steadier rhythm. I step forwards. Dust rises from the plateau in tiny whirlwinds, swirling around our ankles, and in that moment the horizon feels both infinitely distant and achingly close.

Galea's heartbeats flutter through the air in a soft, shining pulse. I reach for her hand; our fingers entwine, simple yet absolute. The herd's low murmur swells into a chant of encouragement, a living vibration that lifts me from root-bound fear. Galea spreads her wings in a graceful arc. Each wingbeat unfolds like a chant—quivering quills catching the light, stirring the air into gentle eddies.

A warmth blooms along my spine as brown feathers burst forth, rough and comforting against my skin. The world dips away, and together we launch into the dawn sky. Below us, the plateau becomes a patchwork of gold and green, the herd shrunk to flickering motes. The air is cool and pure, like the taste of hope on my tongue, and I feel my doubts loosening, drifting behind us like spent embers.

We spiral through currents of rising warmth, riding invisible rivers of wind. Clouds drift by in pastel ridges, their edges tipped with sunlight. In this vault of endless blue, Galea's laughter rings clear—a bright bell that scatters every shadow of uncertainty. My own joy echoes it back, a twin flame that fills my chest so fiercely I fear I might burst.

At the pinnacle of our ascent, the sky stretches around us in every shade of possibility. We hover in a hushed stillness, suspended between earth and infinity. Galea's eyes find mine, and in their depths I see all she feels: fierce pride, tender devotion, unspoken dreams. Love, in that moment, becomes a tangible current—brilliant as lightning, warm as summer rain.

Her lips brush mine in a kiss that sets the world ablaze. It is a flare of everything we have ever hoped for, a promise sealed in the thin air. Slowly, we begin our descent, gliding on a cushion of wind towards the Crystal Glade—its quartz towers gleaming like distant stars. The promise of our future gleams on the horizon, bright and unwavering.

Around us, the world spins in a kaleidoscope of colour and light. And for the first time, I let myself believe in the brilliant, unshakeable shape of what we will become.

Chapter 38

In the heart of the Crystal Glade, the dawn light dances and shimmers, each blade of grass a glinting sword, every crystal tower a luminescent beam piercing the awakening sky. The air is cool and still, as if the world itself inhales and holds its breath, awaiting our arrival. We alight at the core of this resplendent sanctuary, the epicentre of its radiance, and time seems to suspend, crystallising this single, perfect moment—the moment we have longed for through endless nights and days. The crystalline spires surrounding us stretch skyward, their tips aglow like the fingers of some ancient, benevolent giant, the air between them throbbing with a palpable, exhilarating clarity. Galea's hand in mine is a warm anchor, a lifeline steadying me amidst the whirlwind of my own anxieties.

Her eyes, wide and wonder-filled, dart around the Glade, drinking in the spectacle. "Will anyone find us here?" she asks, her voice a silvery thread woven from equal parts thrill and trepidation.

"No," I reassure her, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "While we are here, this place is ours alone."

She nods, her wings settling gently against her back, the gossamer feathers rustling like a whispered secret. Yet, I catch the flicker of doubt in her eyes, a living shadow that flits across her gaze, and I feel its echo resonate within my chest.

"I must admit," she begins, her voice soft as the first tentative notes of a love song, "I'm a little nervous."

"I'm terrified," I confess, the words tumbling forth like a dark, shuddering secret.

Her laughter is a cascade of bright, melodious notes that banish the tension coiled within me. It transforms the air, spinning it into something gossamer-light and breathable. "We'll take our time," she promises, her lips brushing mine in a tender, languid kiss—a whisper of a touch that sets my pulse racing, my skin alight with anticipation.

I am a trembling suppliant before her as she slips free from her dress, the silk garment slithering down her body like a lover's sigh, pooling at her feet like a shimmering moonbeam. She steps free from her undergarment, each movement a marvel, a breathtaking act of bravery that sets my heart aflame. Guiding my hands to her breasts, their warmth ignites my every nerve, and then she draws them lower still.

With my hand pressed against her most intimate sanctum, I weave my Magence, banishing the hair that resides there. "To enhance your pleasure," I murmur, my voice a hoarse echo of itself, and at my touch, she gasps, a shivering, delighted exhalation that sends a fresh thrill coursing through me. My fingers explore her softness, her warmth, delving into her depths with a gentle, rhythmic pulse.

I lower myself to my knees, my lips and tongue discovering her most sensitive recesses, and her cries ascend into the Glade like a sacred, soaring refrain sung only for us.

Then, it is my turn. Her deft hands make quick work of my robe and boots, tugging at my leggings until I stand exposed, already swollen with desire. Her touch is a divine revelation, and as she takes me into her mouth, I must brace myself against the nearest crystal tower, lest I collapse under the wave of sensation that threatens to engulf me.

The heat of her mouth is an inferno, each motion a careful, coaxing pull that hurls me spiralling into a blazing arc of ecstasy. Just as I teeter on the edge of

oblivion, she draws back, her knowing glance a lifeline that tethers me to reality. I sink to the ground beside her, my breath ragged and wild.

Galea reclines, her legs parting in silent invitation, her eyes locked onto mine. I kneel between her thighs, gathering the scattered remnants of my focus to commence the Magence technique that will prevent pregnancy. But her hand on mine is a gentle, steadfast stay. "No," she says, her voice as steady and sure as the earth itself. "Let nature decide our fate."

I falter, my thoughts a chaotic, tumultuous storm.

"I can think of no greater expression of love than bearing your child," she continues, each word a golden, unyielding vow that wraps around my heart, binding us together.

"I thought I'd fallen in love with a carefree teenage girl," I say, smiling warmly as I gaze into her eyes. "But now, lying before me is this poised and mature young woman. Where did she come from?"

She laughs, her whole body caught in the shimmer of the moment, and I feel the tremor of her joy pass into me. "Perhaps you helped create her." Then she reaches up, cups my face between her palms, and steadies her gaze against the trembling inside me. "I've waited for this for so long that it feels like I've waited forever. I want all of you, Elias."

"Are you absolutely certain?" I ask, my voice filled with a mix of anticipation and caution. "Once I'm inside you, there's no turning back. Our destinies will be entwined, and we will be bound as mates for life."

She closes her eyes, a smile slipping across her lips, and draws her legs around my waist. "There is nothing in this world I have ever wanted more. Make us one, Elias."

I enter her, our bodies joining as seamlessly as the interlocking halves of a long-sundered whole. Her warmth envelops me, a living, breathing flame that threatens to consume me utterly. Together, we move as one, our rhythm building like the inexorable approach of a storm, our cries climbing to greet the dawn, a fiercely passionate duet that resonates through the Glade.

Our climax is a cataclysmic, shuddering wave that leaves us breathless, our limbs entwined, our bodies sighing softly in its wake. Yet, even as I believe we have scaled the heights of ecstasy, Galea rolls atop me, her wings stretching

wide, a radiant, feathered canopy. She rides me with a fierce, urgent intensity that sends us spiralling into another dazzling crescendo.

In its aftermath, I am the one left trembling, my breath catching in my throat like a faltering melody. She urges me to my knees, her lithe form turning away from mine, her white wings arching forward like a lover's plea. The sight of her, waiting, wanting, drives me to the very brink of myself.

I take her from behind, my hands gripping her waist, her fervent ardour stoking the inferno between us until we are both consumed, our bodies slick with sweat, our hearts pounding in syncopated rhythm.

As the final echoes of our cries dissipate, she rises, her eyes meeting mine with a mischievous gleam. She moves to a vertical crystal point, her shoulders and back pressing against the cool, unyielding surface. I follow, the heat in my chest a bright, insistent drumbeat.

Lifting her slightly, she wraps her legs around my waist, and the new angle sends a shockwave of pleasure crashing through us both. I thrust into her again, my control slipping away as she screams my name—a piercing, exultant cry that fills the Glade with its wild, unrestrained joy. It is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard.

Exhausted, we slide down the crystal, our limbs heavy and buzzing with spent passion. We find solace in each other's arms, the world spinning in a soft, giddy haze. And though my breath still comes in ragged gasps, I know I must find the words to express what this moment means to me.

"You were...magnificent," I say at last, the words a rough, reverent whisper that feels woefully inadequate.

Her laughter is a bright, clear peal that rings through the Glade, her hand reaching for mine, our fingers intertwining like the roots of an ancient, steadfast tree. "I never imagined it could be so...so wonderful," she murmurs, her cheeks flushed with the radiant, lovely bloom of our union.

Our gazes lock, and in her eyes, I see every promise we have ever made, every dream we have ever shared, shining like newly forged constellations strewn across the velvety expanse of the night sky.

I draw her close, her breath warm against my skin, a tender, intimate caress. "I love you, Galea," I whisper into the soft, fragrant waves of her hair, the words a gentle benediction that anchors me to this moment, to this life, to her.

"And I love you, Elias," she replies, her voice a soft, steadfast beacon, guiding me into the bright, impossible promise of our shared future.

Chapter 39

The Crystal Glade unfolds around us like a living tapestry: the grass beneath our bodies a velvet carpet spangled with dew-bright motes, the crystalline flowers that ring its edges catching sunlight in prismatic bursts, and the sky overhead stretching into an endless dome of cerulean calm. A warm breeze drifts through, carrying the faint scent of wild jasmine and earth's sweet musk, wrapping us in a hush that feels sacred and suspended in time. Every breath we draw here tastes of light and possibility.

"How long can we stay here?" Galea's voice is a soft chime, like wind through hollow reeds, each syllable shimmering in the hush of the Glade.

I turn, meeting her eyes—bright pools reflecting the sun's gentle fire—and feel the weight of certainty settle in my chest like a promise kept. "All day," I murmur, the words warm on my tongue, heavy with hope and the vastness of our shared tomorrow.

At once her whole face blooms in sunlight, cheeks glowing rose, a smile spreading as naturally as dawn across the sky. "All day," she repeats, her whisper a soft echo that settles into my bones.

We lose ourselves in each other beneath the dome of sky. Our bodies press together with a gentle urgency, soft sighs and tremors weaving a tapestry of light between us. Her skin against mine is warm stone cooled by moonlight, every touch a spark that sets the world aflame in brilliance. Our breathing becomes a shared rhythm—rise and fall like distant waves—each gasp and murmur sealing the future we carve from this moment.

When hunger comes, we lean against a smooth, sun-warmed boulder and share a feast of cool melon, golden honeycomb, and crusty bread that flakes like sunlit promise. The fruit's juice drips sweet and sticky between our lips, and we laugh, tasting joy as tangibly as we taste summer's harvest.

Later, when the sun sinks low and drapes the glade in rose and lavender light, we find new angles of delight. Our movements are slow, reverent, a choreography of whispered names and gentle moans. In each other's arms we feel the fragile barriers of fear dissolve, leaving only the bright clarity of love's true shape.

As twilight deepens, the crystal blooms around us begin to glow with an inner light—soft hues that dance over our entwined forms. We nibble on wild berries, their tart sweetness a playful counterpoint to the Glade’s hush. The air cools, and we draw our limbs closer, the night sky unfurling overhead like black velvet stitched with diamond stars.

Crickets trill their lullaby, and a faint breeze stirs the grass at our feet. The earth beneath us remains warm and solid, a gentle cradle for our dreams. I press my cheek to Galea’s hair, breathing in the faint scent of jasmine and promise, and let myself believe in the boundless shape of what we will become—two souls entwined in the glowing heart of this bright, unbroken day.

Chapter 40

Every sunrise spills across the sky in molten gold and rose, the world alive with the unshakeable promise of the life Galea and I will share. At the Tower, my days pulse with purpose: sunlight banishes the shadows from the training ground as Magence creations—sleek ribbons of light, swirling motes of crystalline energy—dance around me with unerring grace. Each summoned shape obeys my will, tracing arcs of colour in the air. Other trainees circle me with wide-eyed awe, their whispered disbelief like ripples in a pond. Bullying is rare—when it comes, Eela and Karna stride in, shields of steel and solidarity, swift to scatter any cruelty before it finds purchase.

Evenings unfurl in a riot of wonder: deep lavender dusk gives way to stars that glitter like scattered diamonds overhead, and Galea’s laughter echoes through the warm, perfumed breeze. We wander the river bank and forest paths wreathed in fireflies, every moment a revelation. Her joy is a living thread, weaving through the tapestry of our days until it binds us together. Eela and Karna hover on the horizon of our shared world—like earth and sky, always there—but their presence no longer weighs upon me. Instead, I feel their fierce devotion as a shield: their watchful eyes a reminder of the secret they guard.

Then one afternoon, beneath a canopy of blossoming magnolias, they find me alone and share their news. Eela’s hand, pale with wonder, rests upon her stomach. With hushed voices trembling between relief and fear, they ask me to conceal this blessing until they can summon the courage to speak to their parents. I nod, throat tight, and channel my Magence in a silken veil of light that cloaks every sign of new life—no shape or shadow betrays the truth.

Weeks shimmer past in a brilliant blur of training, exploration, and stolen confidences. The pulse of my new life thrums inside me like a steady drumbeat.

One day, I stray into the Tower gardens, where lavender and rosemary scent the air, and the world seems hushed beneath the pale afternoon sun. Then I sense him before I see him—Rensa. He stands at the edge of the rose arch, eyes blazing with a storm of hatred that presses around me like crackling thunder. My pulse hammers; my true self stirs, whispering its dark hunger.

He lunges. Steel whistles through the air as his swords carve arcs of cold intent. I call my staff to my palm—its wood alive beneath my fingers—and parry, every clash ringing like bells of warning. Rensa's blades bite deeply; sparks of Magence flare as he shifts to raw energy, channelling his wrath into balls of searing fire. I hold back, desperate not to maim him—yet the tide of his resentment pulls at me, and I struggle to keep control.

Then, with a roar tearing free in my chest, my true form shatters the cage of my restraint. Bones shift and sinew knits anew in a blur of agony and power. Scales ripple across my skin; claws unravel from fingertips; my eyes burn with feral luminescence. I become the monster whispering in my blood. Terror and exhilaration surge together as I strike, each blow delivered with ravenous precision. By the time I still, Rensa lies crumpled beneath me—bloodied, broken, and unrecognisable.

Chapter 41

My true self flings open its mind to the twins' parents, Lella and Kran, with a sudden vividness that feels like ice water poured straight into my heart—every chamber of my chest jolts in protest.

They stand in the Tower's great library, where crystalline spires and slabs of pale stone rise in sharp, unforgiving geometry. The walls catch the diffused light of high windows and fracture it into a thousand prismatic shards. Against this cold architecture, Lella and Kran are blazing beacons: their crimson robes a burnished blaze that spills warmth across the crystal floor.

Lella is perched in a shadowed reading alcove, her slender form bent over a leather-bound tome. Her long black tail coils around the knee of her boot with exacting precision, as if it were a dancer frozen in mid-performance. Flickers of lamplight ripple across the pages she studies, illuminating the fine lines of her face and the slight parting of her lips in concentration.

Meanwhile, Kran paces among the towering stacks, fingertips drifting like moths over the spines of forgotten volumes. His robe swishes softly against the stone, and with each turn he bends to lift a dusty ledger or a scroll bound in sea-green leather. The echoes of his footfalls are hushed but insistent, like a heartbeat that won't remain still.

The instant my true self perceives them, the rest of me recoils in horror: I never summoned them. And yet—it is my own truest self, my unbidden judge and devourer, that reaches its will across the space between us.

In a heartbeat's flash, it snatches them both—no gentling wash of Magence to soften the rupture in space, only a forceful collapse that snaps the library out of existence around us. They shudder, limbs slack with astonishment, before all four of us flicker into being in Eela and Karna's chambers.

I clench my fists, saffron scales of dread crawling up my spine, and push against that inner tyrant—but it will not yield. My fingers itch, unclawed, as I watch it point a long claw at a carved oaken door.

Inside, Eela and Karna lie entwined on their sunlit bed. Golden afternoon light pools over red linen, illuminating their skin. They wear nothing but each other, and their peace is so absolute it glows like a beacon.

Karna's hand curves over Eela's stomach, fingers brushing the fine down of her skin with reverence. His voice drifts through the charged air, soft as a lover's promise yet crystal-clear in that hushed chamber. "We should tell Mother and Father—about us, about you," he says, his palm drawing gentle circles over the swell of life growing beneath. He laughs, a sound lighter than a summer breeze through wind-chimes. "Maybe we should ask Elias to lift the concealment. Let everyone see."

Eela's laughter ripples up like silver bells as she twists to nip at his wrist, her hair cascading in ebony waves that dance across her eyes. "Then you mean it?" she teases, her tail flicking in triumph. "You're proud... to be a father?"

Without hesitation, Karna's grin sharpens, as bright as dawn. "I would cut down the entire world for you—both of you."

They lie in companionable silence for a precious moment, as though the world outside has been sealed away. Then Eela springs atop him, pinning him beneath her with playful ferocity—an intimate tussle that speaks of years of shared mischief and boundless trust. "You aren't even strong enough to beat me," she taunts, claws raking softly down his chest in a feather-light caress.

He pretends indignation, twisting to seize her wrist, but in the end he lets her prevail. She pins his arms overhead, straddling him, their bodies a perfect mirror: the matching shade of black to their fur, the identical curl of their tails, even the curve of fangs bared in laughter.

My true self remains deadly silent, watching as Eela settles above her brother, triumphant and unashamed. “Should we tell them now?” she whispers, her voice low and teasing.

Karna glances towards the door—towards us, though he cannot see—then shrugs, a brief flicker of hesitation in his storm-dark eyes. “You’re braver than me,” he admits, and the words are almost a caress.

Eela’s gaze softens. She traces a single finger down his cheek. “That isn’t true,” she murmurs, and the vulnerability in her tone snaps something brittle and cold inside me.

Then Karna surges up, capturing her lips in a wild, fierce kiss that flays away every remaining shroud of restraint. He lifts her, flips her beneath him in one fluid motion, and they become a tangle of breath and heat, of grasping hands and trembling limbs. A flush of burning embarrassment streaks my cheeks, but the twins pay it no mind; they exist only for each other in this sacred crucible. Their love is the sun—and I, an unbidden moth, am drawn inevitably to its consuming blaze.

There is no haste here, only a slow, sacred choreography. Every touch lingers like a prayer. Eela’s legs lock around Karna’s hips, and he buries his face in the strand of her hair, inhaling her scent as though it were the very air he breathes. When he enters her, the sound is not a gasp but a soft surrender, a grateful sigh that vibrates through the stillness. They move together in a rhythm born of countless shared moments—each thrust a testament to devotion untainted by shame.

Then I sense the shimmer of a Veil woven by my true self: Eela and Karna are cocooned in privacy, deaf and blind to every presence but their own. Only Lella and Kran—and the two versions of me—witness this intimate sacrament.

I risk a glance at the twins’ parents. Lella stands rigid in the doorway, her hand curled white around the carved wood, tears shimmering at the corners of her eyes. I cannot tell whether they are tears of fury or of heartbreak. Kran is motionless, jaw clenched so fiercely I can almost hear his bones creak; his tail lashes in silent torment.

The twins crest their shared climax. Eela's cry rings out first, clear and shining like a bell at dawn, then Karna's answers in a deep, resonant note that shakes the air. For a suspended heartbeat, the world holds nothing but their voices, an echo of love so raw it reverberates through every corner of my being.

They collapse together, lungs heaving, limbs entwined in a final, perfect embrace. Even in exhaustion, Karna cradles Eela's head in his hand, as if to shield her from even the gentlest harm.

Only then does my true self lift the Veil.

Eela's wide eyes swallow the chamber in a gulp of panic. She draws the blanket around her trembling form, pressing it against Karna as if it might hold back the world. Shock ripples across her features, followed by a gray pallor of numb resignation. Karna looks up, dread crawling over his face like a familiar shadow.

Lella's composure fractures in a single breath; the next, she is sobbing in a guttural cascade of anguish—centuries of unspoken terrors given voice. Kran remains silent, fists balling and unclenching, claws extending and retracting in a savage staccato.

I feel my true self ripple and waver, casting one severe glance at me—and then, as though snapping a tendon, I am myself again. My flesh feels tight, my mind fits: I stand at the foot of the bed in my own skin, mortal and exposed.

The urge to flee surges through me—escape has always been my refuge—but I refuse it. Instead, I bow my head, hands lifted in a gesture of helpless apology. “I’m sorry,” I croak, my voice ragged as burned silk. “I swear I would never have done this—never willingly.”

The air holds its breath until Karna's quiet voice cuts through it. “You might as well lift the concealment,” he says, and nods towards Eela. “Tell the truth now.”

With a slow twist of my hand and a ripple of Magence, the concealment spell dissolves. Eela sits up, arms crossing over her breasts, proud and unbowed. The gentle curve of her pregnant belly gleams as plainly as a rising moon.

Lella's sobs slow to hiccups, Kran's tension coalesces into cold steel. His long black tail coils around Lella protectively as he leans close to murmur, “Who else knows?”—so quiet it is almost more thought than speech.

“No one but the six of us,” I answer, voice calm despite the quake inside.

Eela reaches for Karna's hand and holds it with fierce determination. "We chose this," she declares, each word sharp as cut glass. Her eyes flame with a pride I have never seen so pure.

"We made love in the Glade," Karna adds, his tone both defiant and tender. "She's my Ama, and I am hers. If there must be punishment, let it fall on me alone."

Eela's protest is fierce but soft. "No, my love—"

"My darling," Karna counters, lifting her face in his hands. "I want you and our child safe."

Silence settles over the chamber like dust. We all smelt our pain and fear in that searing quiet, forging it into something hard and clear.

At last Lella straightens, dabs at her eyes, and speaks. Her voice is not angry but weary—as if the words cost more than she can spare. "Leave us," she says, more a soft exhalation than a command.

I bow once more, and with a final twist of Magence I slip away, leaving behind the echoes of love, of grief, and of a choice that will change us all. Back in the gardens, where Rensa lies unconscious, the world seems impossibly vast—and aching quiet.

Chapter 42

The air crackles with the vivid certainty of what my true self has wrought, an almost tangible energy swirling around me. The venom has infiltrated Rensa's body, its toxic tendrils weaving through his veins with malicious intent, like dark serpents slithering with purpose. I place my hands gently yet firmly upon his fevered skin, which burns with an unnatural heat. I focus intensely, summoning every ounce of inner strength to coax the venom out, a task that feels like pulling a living, writhing creature from its lair. The venom resists, as if it possesses a sinister will of its own, twisting and fighting back with relentless vigour. But I remain steadfast, pouring every drop of my energy into the battle, and gradually, I begin to wrest control from the venom's grip, feeling its hold weaken under my relentless touch.

With the venom drawn out and absorbed into my own veins, I send the severely injured Rensa to Parnax for healing through the shimmering veil of teleportation. His bloodied body is a stark and undeniable testament to the

chaos unleashed by my unbridled transformation, a tableau of violence and regret etched into the ground. The weight of guilt presses down on me, a relentless and unyielding force that crushes the air from my lungs, leaving me breathless and heavy-hearted.

I wonder how Rensa will react when he discovers that his twin siblings are in love and have a child together, their Bond a radiant and binding force that wraps around him with the sharp and unforgiving certainty of my true self's intent. The heavy coil of expectation settles in the spaces between my thoughts, a living thing that pulses with the bright insistence of the inevitable, its presence both daunting and inescapable.

I question whether he will seek revenge when he learns that my true self was the one who revealed the twins' secret, the thought a sharp, cutting thing that slices through the fabric of my certainty like a blade. Will his hatred ignite anew, a fierce and unyielding flame that threatens to consume everything in its path, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake?

My true self hums with a quiet, certain satisfaction, its presence a constant and unyielding reminder of the chaos it has set in motion. I feel the bright and greedy stretch of its intent, the weight of it a heavy and unrelenting force that leaves me breathless, overwhelmed by the scope of its design. It watches the unfolding of events with dark, insatiable hunger, its anticipation a living entity that pulses with a greedy insistence, eager to witness the consequences of its actions.

Chapter 43

Severed but not free, I resolve that exile is my only viable path. The distance will afford me the space I need to reflect and process all that has transpired. My true self's hunger has transformed into a living, breathing entity, its next move a relentless and dark echo that beats steadily through the silent gaps in my thoughts. I cannot allow it to triumph. Not this time.

I teleport to the treehouse, where the crisp, invigorating air stands in stark contrast to the oppressive coil of expectation that clings to me like a shadow. The note I leave for Galea carries a tender and insistent weight, its words a gentle and tentative promise, trembling with uncertainty. The distance between us feels as vast and uncharted as the sky, a chasm as wide and unyielding as the infinite spaces between the stars. Will she understand why I have left, or will this newfound uncertainty become a burden too heavy for her to bear?

The thought of her alone is a heavy, suffocating presence, a tightening coil that squeezes the edges of my resolve. Yet, at this moment, it is the only course of action I can take.

I teleport to the other side of the world, where the air pulsates with the vibrant hum of life. This place is where rogue Maginists find exile, their presence an unspoken, vivid force that permeates the very atoms of the atmosphere. The landscape is alien, a wild and vibrant expanse that unfurls like the bright, intricate tapestry of a distant, impossible dream.

Chapter 44

Galea drifts through my senses like a half-remembered reverie. Her presence trails me across this land drained of Magence, a faint luminescence glimmering at the edges of my vision—an echo of warmth lingering where I thought I'd severed every tie. Yet even here, amid parched stones and windswept plains, the world coils around me with an inescapable gravity. I wonder if this exile can banish her memory, or if fate will spin its silken threads across time and space to draw me back.

Ahead, a cave yawns open—a jagged shadow etched into sun-bleached rock. The mouth breathes out cool darkness flecked with phosphorescent moss, its gentle glow beckoning me inwards. I step over the threshold, and the air changes: rich with damp earth, tangy minerals, and the hush of hidden life. Everywhere, small creatures chirp and rustle, their calls weaving a tapestry of unbroken rhythm.

In the cavern's heart stands a lion centaur, regal and immense. His robe is spun of molten gold, each fold shimmering like liquid flame against the cave's muted gloom. The leonine half of him is cloaked in midnight fur so deep it seems to swallow light; his human torso crowned by a mane of ebony that falls to broad shoulders. He radiates a calm authority, as though he alone can still the ripples in time. He is surrounded by alchemical equipment, and I wonder how he could possibly have acquired it.

"I am Arno," he intones, his voice a sonorous rumble that resonates off stone walls like distant thunder. "Once Head of the Maginist Order, before Leera claimed that mantle."

I falter beneath the weight of his revelation, words stumbling from my lips: "You—exiled?"

His gaze, dark and unflinching, pins me in place. “For my experiments,” he admits, a shadow of pride in his lowered head.

Opening his mind to me, Arno unfolds a memory like a living painting. I stand in the arena, its dust swirling in golden shafts of late afternoon sun. The air thrums with hushed anticipation. I see his sword’s silver flash as he parries Leera’s staff, hear the thunk of steel on wood, taste grit on my tongue. Every motion is precise, a disciplined dance—until, with one swift strike, Leera disarms him. The world tilts as I feel his defeat: the sting of sweat, the tension draining from taut muscles, the echo of silent awe in the stands.

That memory settles in the cave like a tangible weight. I taste its bitterness on my tongue, its finality cutting through every shred of doubt.

Arno’s voice draws me back. “Then came the Sar Ala.” He blinks, and two slender figures shimmer into view—tall as trees, clad in silvery scales, antlered heads swaying with silent deliberation. Their eyes glint with unsettling intent. “They commanded I fashion a creature of unparalleled allure,” he says, each word humming with resolve. “One you would be unable to resist.”

A jolt of recognition sears through me: Galea, born of their demand. My chest tightens, heart pounding. I almost taste the lingering tang of her laughter, the unbreakable bond she wove around me before I knew.

I contemplate leaping back further—destroying my own egg sac before I hatched—but the cost would be intolerable to my fellow Maginists. Instead, I steel my resolve: I must unmake Galea’s genesis at its source.

“Help me,” I whisper, voice trembling with determination. “Focus on that visitation. I need its image to carry me through time.”

Arno’s brows knit in surprise—time travel is thought impossible—but he inclines his head. “Enter the past,” he orders, eyes glowing with reluctant faith.

The cave tilts. Colours fracture into ribbons of light as my resolve crystallises into a single purpose. Yet the memory he channels is fractured, pulled taut by unseen currents. I emerge not at the moment before the egg’s creation, but afterwards—trapped in a fragment of a future I cannot undo.

The same two Sar Ala stand again before Arno. “It is done,” they intone in hushed, alien voices. “She carries the egg.”

Despair coils around me, heavy as iron. Breathless, I tear myself back to the present, the cave's scents rushing home—damp stone, ancient dust, the sharp scent of betrayal.

I take my leave of Arno, the certainty of his deceit cutting deeper than any blade. Rising, I turn towards the exit, and in that moment Galea's echo threads through every thought, every heartbeat. No matter how far I run, her dream will eternally shadow mine.

Chapter 45

The world shatters into violence. I see them: dark shapes on the horizon, a swarm that thickens the air with wrath. The Sar Ala. They advance like a gathering storm, their forms lit by the late afternoon sun, each step a drumbeat that sets my heart racing. The ground trembles beneath them, carrying their demand ahead like the crack of thunder: the Maginists must hand me over.

Before the call even dies, I hear the whistle of the alert—high, insistent, a piercing thread of sound that knits the Tower with urgency. Every blade of grass seems to quiver in response. I feel the thrum of my own pulse in my chest, a wild and unsteady thing, as I race from the gardens to the front of the Tower.

The Maginists are already there, a bright and unyielding line against the dull intensity of the Sar Ala. I see their robes, vivid splashes of colour in the light, each one marking its wearer with the fierce pride of belonging. Benna stands at the forefront, his jaw set with a determination that mirrors my own. The sight of him steadies me, and I ready myself to join the fray.

But before I can, a voice slices through the chaos, a clear and familiar note that rings like a cracked bell.

“Not without me.”

I turn, heart lurching, and there is Rensa—still healing, still unsteady, but there. He limps towards me, each step a defiant insistence.

“Rensa, no—” I begin, but the words are lost in the cacophony. He is by my side, eyes blazing with the same fire that consumed him when he fought me.

We move as one, our bodies a blur of Magence and momentum. Around us, the air crackles with the force of powers colliding. The Maginists hold their

ground, a living wall of resistance, but the Sar Ala push forwards in an unbroken wave. I see their eyes, dark and intent, fixed on me like predators on a scent.

Rensa and I surge into the heart of the battle, our presence a sudden and disruptive force. He moves with reckless abandon, his Magence a vivid flare against the sky—the inferno of his rage transformed into raw and brilliant power. I fight to keep pace, my staff a blur as I channel the very essence of the world around me. We hold them back, but I feel the burn of their relentlessness, a tide that threatens to sweep us away.

“Now!” Rensa shouts, his voice a harsh, urgent command. Before I can protest, he grips my arm and the world tilts around us, a dizzying rush of light and sound. We land in a breathless heap, the landscape familiar and foreign all at once. It takes a heartbeat to realise: the plateau. Pulled from the battle to this isolated edge.

Rensa sways, struggling for balance, the strain of his injuries etched across his face. I reach to steady him, my breath catching in my chest. “Why?” I demand, the single word sharp with unspoken questions. “Why risk yourself to save me? Why help at all?”

He meets my gaze, and his eyes are a tempest of anger and something else. In a sudden, jarring flash, he reaches towards me—not with his hands, but with his mind. His memories unfurl in vivid bursts, a quick-fire assault of colour and sensation that leaves me reeling.

I see her: the young bipan Sar Arsam woman, bare and unashamed, her silver hair cascading across his bed like moonlight. She visits him nightly, each time weaving her silken web tighter. His love for her is a raw, aching thing that shimmers in every glance, every whispered word. He shows me how they make love in the Crystal Glade, their bodies a tangle of breath and skin, the very stars bearing witness to their impossible Bond.

In an instant, I am there with him, tasting the sharp tang of pine on the air, feeling the chill of night bleed into dawn. Her voice is a warm, intimate rush, her confession a knife: another lover. She cannot give him up.

“Who?” Rensa demands, and his voice cracks with the weight of his desperation.

She shows him, but the memory dissolves before I can see who he is. Rensa is holding back, keeping that knowledge even now. My frustration flares, but I

am pulled deeper into his memories, the unrelenting force of them like a river threatening to sweep me away.

I feel the hollow of his betrayal, the vast and empty space it cleaves inside him. I see him change as he lies injured after our battle, the shift a slow and painful thing—a transformation he never meant to undergo. His anger hardens, turns molten, a new and volatile alloy forged from the ashes of hope.

Then I glimpse a different memory: what they have done to Eela and Karna. The sight of it cuts through me, fierce and unyielding—like his own pain. Their Magence suppressed, their bodies confined to separate chambers, each awaiting judgement. I am to stand before the High Council, to provide testimony.

The memory breaks, and I am left in the silence of the plateau. Rensa stands before me, breathing hard, the question burning in his eyes: what will I do with this knowledge?

I fumble for words, the tangled threads of my thoughts refusing to knit together. “But you—” I begin, unsure how to reassemble what he has shown me. “After what I did—”

“After what she did,” he cuts in, his voice a sharp and brittle thing. “I know how betrayal feels. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

I meet his gaze, and for one breathless moment, all else falls away—the blood and the battle, the distance and despair, the burdens of our separate paths. I see the bare and vulnerable truth in his eyes, and it sets my heart racing with a new and unfamiliar urgency.

“Then help me,” I say, the words a living challenge, a fragile bridge that trembles in the space between us. “Help me finish this.”

Rensa hesitates, the pause a long and silent breath that stretches the world to its breaking point. I feel my pulse in my ears, my chest, my throat—a single, insistent note.

At last, he nods, the motion quick and taut.

We return to the unfolding battle, the air around us alight with possibility. I feel the weight of the future settling into shape, as bright and terrible as the dawn.

We plunge back into the melee, a swirling tempest of dust, blood, and unbridled rage. Rensa's anger blazes fiercely, like a sunburst of his Magence, and the air crackles with the scorching heat of his fury. The Sar Ala fall beneath his twin swords, their silver blood hissing and steaming as it splatters across his robe, leaving a trail of shimmering droplets. I move beside him, my resolve cold and sharp in my gut like a blade of ice. We fight as one, yet still, they encircle us, vicious and unrelenting, like wolves closing in on their prey. I cast a glance towards the Tower, looming ominously above us, and an idea takes shape: a spark, a flame, a plan igniting in my mind.

With a defiant shout, I dismiss my staff, drawing back the energy of my Magence. The Sar Ala hesitate, their movements stilled by confusion. "I'm joining you!" I proclaim. Rensa's eyes lock onto mine, a furious plea burning within their depths. I maintain our connection, even as a Sar Arsam charges towards me, its alien eyes gleaming with a triumphant glint.

"Coward!" Rensa's voice is raw, seared by emotion, a fiery brand against my skin.

The Sar Arsam seizes me, its talons sinking into my arms with a vice-like grip. I cry out, but it isn't pain; it's the exultant release of wild, reckless power surging through me.

The Sar Ala swarm like an ocean of silver bodies, their movements a chattering, roaring tide. "Elias!" Rensa's voice cracks like a whip, or perhaps it's just an echo from the past. I am far away now, deep within the forest, the Maginists concealed behind the veil of trees. I inhale deeply, and the air vibrates with potential energy.

The Sar Ala surround me, a cacophonous, roaring mob of mutated forms. I let my fingers twitch, signalling a countdown. One... two... three... I unleash a torrent of energy, blasting them with all the force I can muster.

The world dissolves into a blinding white light, and I am adrift in its brilliance. My body surrenders, the ground rushing up to meet me with dizzying speed.

I slip into unconsciousness.