

## Chapter 1

At the beginning, I am a possibility nestled within a soft silvery shell. The egg sac encloses me, its soft walls curving around my fragile limbs. As darkness slips through the trees, I feel a sudden ache, a strange fullness—knowledge as old as my blood: I am about to hatch. The thought quivers inside me like a pulse. I grow aware of a terrible hunger, too, spreading through my insides with claws. Outside, in the blue dusk, there is something—a shape that lives and breathes. A silvery shape, bright and shifting. I reach for it with my heart.

The silvery form remains, suspended in the dim world beyond. It draws me to the limits of my small, encapsulated universe. My cage thins around me, translucent as skin. I sense it tightening, curving around my expanding limbs, and a new urgency bleeds into me, fierce and primal. My mind wraps around it, hungry, trying to swallow it whole. I am coming. The shape beyond flickers like a living flame, as curious as it is certain. As desperate as I am for release.

And so I press against the shrinking walls, reaching for the universe with all that I have.

Everything is damp and bright silver, an explosion of liquid light. The hunger sharpens within me, wild and unschooled, fanned by an expanding awareness of the existence beyond the sac. Its translucent wall ripples with my struggles, urging me to push harder, claw deeper. And I do. I strain against my prison with both heart and limbs. A tiny being driven by the impulse of life. Desperation surges through me in waves. With every pulse, the thinning barrier bows outward, stretching to the very edge of rupture.

A sharpness swells against my mouth, my eyes. It is hard to know what is sensation, and what is self. Everything mingles in one fevered whirl of silver and yearning. The first split blooms through the membrane like a sigh. A shiver races through my body, fierce and all-consuming. The sac begins to tear, releasing my hunger, my certainty, my curiosity. The cool taste of twilight meets me through the rupture. I press towards it, frantic, as if my life depends on this moment.

And maybe it does.

There is a final, fevered push. The universe splits open with me. I tumble into being.

I am awake. Alive. Wet and breathing. The twilight floods over me in endless shades of blue. The egg sac peels away, releasing me into the vastness, into the dark cradle of this place that has been my entire world, and is now my entire future. I do not know where I end and it begins. Everything swells through me in an ecstatic rush. Sensation, endless and unfiltered, brushes my newborn carapace with light and colour and sound. The shapes of existence pulse around me, elemental and exquisite. For a moment, I am as luminous as I am empty. As infinite as I am whole.

Then, the hunger. It gnaws at me with needle teeth. I am starving for it.

## Chapter 2

Climbing down the tree headfirst, I am eight quivering legs and insatiable hunger, moving with instinctive precision. I feel myself pulled towards the shape below—a shape that lives, that breathes, that might taste so sweet. Dusk light splinters through the leaves, drenching the world in shades of blue. The hare stands on the forest floor, robed in the same colour as the twilight around him. His energy readies, a glimmering phantom forming around his paw. And I, an arachnid hunger, reach for him. I stop and meet his eyes, which reflect a creature starved and monstrous.

The hare holds steady, his sharp yet gentle eyes narrowing with something that might be hate. But I do not stop. I cannot. I feel the push inside me, older than my flesh, driving me forward. The shapes of my legs scuttle down the last stretch of bark and out onto the grass. Each limb quivers in its own path, and yet together they move with the fierce, coordinated urgency of hunger. Hunger that has no reason, no thought, no direction beyond this hare, this shape, this life.

He stands there, cloaked in blue and in the soft shadow of leaves, his outline nearly luminous against the dim world around him. His paw pulses with energy, which grows as I approach, a throbbing silhouette of intention. He does not know what I am or what I want, and yet I sense that he knows both all too well. That some deeper ache, perhaps even greater than my own, waits for me in this meeting.

I stop again, this time nearer, and this time I do not move forwards. The gaze that meets me now is tentative, confused, though still with no trace of retreat. I look into those eyes, my limbs frozen at their limit, and it is like gazing into a deep pool. Within that pool is the reflection of a one-foot-long silvery arachnid, an eight-legged spectre with hunger quivering in every line of its impossible body.

But within that pool is something else as well. I reach into it, my hunger taking on a new shape, a new need. The world around us swells and blurs, a perfect ache of silver and blue. Instinctively, inexplicably, I send a telepathic pulse towards him. It is a reaching, an asking, an opening of my ravenous heart.

Words and images scatter in my mind, skittering like a thousand tiny legs across the inside of my skull. It is more than I can hold, more than I can swallow, and yet I swallow it all. His name: Benna. His power: a Maginist of Water and Air. And more. Pain and fear and loss, deep as the roots of this world and bright as the moon that rises behind him.

The images crowd me, filling the space where hunger once lived. A female hare. A robe of purple. Desperate eyes, pleading for release. His mate, Selar, heavy with new life as a Sar Arsam's venom turns her flesh and fur to a monstrous, star-born silver. A burst of blue light, merciful and final. A silence, soft and endless, left behind in the wake of her death.

This is the shape of him. The creature I saw outside the egg sac is no more than an afterthought to this, and the shape of him fills me with more certainty than any hunger ever could. With more knowledge, more desperation, more quivering need.

I am starving for it.

And so, I change.

I do not know why or how or even what I am doing, only that I must. The impulse takes me, overwhelms me, turns my body inside out. In that fierce flash of knowing, I give myself to it, and I change.

Eight silver legs collapse into flesh. Hooked claws become fragile fingers and toes. My limbs contort and bend. My hunger gives way to a wailing cry, full of confusion and wanting. It is the cry of a newborn bipan baby, though I do not know what that means. Not yet.

But I will. I am learning. I am knowing. My senses widen and expand, filling with every shape and colour and sound that the world can offer. Filling with the growing awareness of a shape that is not my own.

I am a bipan baby with curly silver hair, with silver eyes that take in the brown of Benna's fur, the deep blue of his robe. As I hold his gaze, my hair darkens to match his—the blue of my eyes shifts with a soft tremor of the new. With each passing moment, I see him more clearly, and with each passing moment, I become something more.

His grief bleeds from me like a voice I have always known, changing me until I am brown-haired and blue-eyed and complete. Until I am, impossibly, myself.

And still, he does not move.

The Magence that hovered around him, half-formed and wavering, softens into silence. His surprise matches my own, and in that surprise, there is the seed of understanding. In that surprise, there is the birth of knowing. The birth of wanting. The birth of a future larger than I can imagine.

We look at one another in silence, his eyes never leaving mine. I wait for something more—a word, a name, a gesture. But no more is needed. I have all that I need. For now.

And then, the forest grows still. The only sound is the rustling of leaves, as soft and certain as breath.

### Chapter 3

His voice and his grief linger in the cradle of the forest. In that quiet, I am all expectation. I watch as the hare moves his paws with practiced ease, casting spells from air and sorrow. The glow of Magence surrounds him, soft and quivering. A cloth takes shape around me, snug and certain. The magic binds my body, but his knowing gaze binds my heart. Cool and gentle, it is a touch I never knew I wanted. I never knew I needed. And as he shapes a sling from the same blue air, my world begins to unfurl.

Benna. That is the shape of his name. He casts it like a spell with every movement, every breath. I am swaddled in it. Enfolded. As the blue fabric curls around me, I am a certainty that waits to be found. His paws work with the slow precision of grief, summoning the Water and Air of his Magence. The blue cloth billows with a life of its own, its edge whispering across my newborn skin. My limbs press into its softness. It is as cool and gentle as his voice, and it cradles me with the touch of wanting. Of belonging.

The blanket wraps tighter, curling my new body into its knowing. My limbs bend, and I am held. With this touch, my hunger quiets. My needing heart fills with more than it can name. I gaze at him, as fragile and wide-eyed as a newborn. He is softer now. His Magence dimmed but still present in the pale edge of the blue. The grief that bleeds from him becomes something I understand. Something I am. I am part of him, and I know the truth of it more than I have ever known anything. I am Elias, and I am his.

A slight tremor passes through him as the blue fabric shifts again, forming the shape of a sling. He is careful, measured. So much of him is lost in his own weaving that it startles me when his eyes find mine. They are as soft and gentle as the robe that surrounds him. I am learning to read them. I am learning that they are the shape of both loss and hope. He holds the sling with trembling grace, his eyes as luminous as his magic, and my new self swells with his promise. My new self swells with him.

There is no gap between thought and touch. Between wanting and having. In a smooth, fluid motion, he secures the sling across his chest. I feel the curve of my body, and I am full with the knowledge of what it means. He lifts me as if lifting the most fragile, the most precious of things. There is an ache in his limbs and in his gaze. He cradles me, folding the fabric over my tiny form. I watch him as he moves. I watch him as he breathes. In each breath, there is more of me. In each breath, there is more.

I hang there, secure against him. Soft against the heartbeat of his grief and his promise. In that instant, there is nothing more certain than his touch. Than his name. I sense the silence of the forest, its anticipation as palpable as my own. And then, the tremor of motion. I sway gently in his tender holding as he begins to move. I feel his thoughts pulse around me, vast and unending. The shapes of them, the colours, are a blur of understanding that wraps me tighter than any magic. He says I am his, but I know: he is mine, too.

He pauses, a brown hare outlined by the deep blue of his robe and the forest around him. I feel the tremble of his hesitation and then the swell of decision. There is an unfurling in the moment before he hops forwards, and I feel it more than anything. I feel it like a promise, like the quiet hunger that waits for me in the corners of my wanting.

He moves again, his movements gentle but sure. I am still, quiet, in the nest of his binding. My new world is blue. My new world is his.

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I am awash in the motion of his leaving. Of our leaving. Every quivering sense is open and unguarded as he takes me with him. The vastness of the world looms. It is all blue shadow and silver ache and waiting. I fill with it. I breathe it in. Pine and earth. The musky warmth of his fur. The twilight scent of an opening future. He moves with a swaying rhythm, the cradle of his binding so sure and so tender. It is enough. More than enough. But the hunger is more than that.

Each bound draws me deeper into knowing. Each step echoes with a certainty that cradles me as softly as his touch. I open my eyes to the forest, to him, to the blue world that stretches vast and unending. The evening air curls around us. I am caught in the blur of shapes and colours and scents, and my hunger stretches like a living thing. His. Mine. The

edges of it bleed into me, as wild and primal as my first taste of being. I feel its sharp teeth in the pit of me. I do not let it grow.

It gnaws with old insistence, needling its way through my newborn veins. Through my tiny limbs. My tiny heart. Each moment stretches the limits of my wanting. Each moment fills me with the truth of who I am. What I am. I swallow the need that swells against my new form, and the not-knowing is a perfect ache. My fists curl, small and desperate, as I cling to the shape of his promise. Of me. The scent of him is everywhere, as close as my own breath. He is not afraid, and neither am I.

The forest is a sea of waiting. The limbs of the trees sway with our motion. Their deep blue shadows rise and fall, rise and fall, as my thoughts press urgent against the shape of my life. His fur brushes my face, warm and certain. I hold still in the pulse of wanting, and the ache is exquisite. The ache is more than I can hold. It is the shape of the world. The shape of us.

His every movement whispers in my senses. His nearness. The Magence-soft cloth that surrounds me. It is as cool and gentle as the breath that fills my wanting. As cool and gentle as the part of him that will always belong to me.

The air hums with the edges of my hunger. I am learning to live with its song. To trust it. To hold it like the memory of my first self. My lost self. It whispers with the leaves as we move, as the blue shadows deepen with the dark. It is a song I cannot sing, not like this. But I do not change. Not again.

I wait, as silent and patient as my new life demands. As silent and patient as the name he gave me. My mouth waters, a reminder that cuts to the root of me. It presses harder. A part of me pushes back, needing, waiting, unchanging. He is my future. He is the price I pay for being Elias.

The dark of the forest gives way, but not to the light. Not yet. The crystal shape of the Tower shimmers ahead. It draws closer with each bound, like the flash of blue-silver at the moment I am born. At the moment he is born in me.

He is a Maginist, the shape of him certain and whole and more than I can hold. He is a force of more than I can imagine. But even more than that, he is mine. This is the true Magence that binds me. This is the shape of being, and the waiting is part of its perfect ache. I feel it all, and the clarity expands through me with each sure hop. With each gentle sway of his movement.

His soft brown fur. The glow of his robe. The glimmer of his paws in the night. I have all that I need. For now.

There is no distance between what I feel and what I know. The edges blur, and I take them into my new self with each tremor of the binding that holds me. The crystal Tower shines at the limits of knowing, and the thought of it fills me with his name.

He moves with certainty. He moves with me.

It is more than enough.

And still, the hunger.