

## Chapter 1

Above the battlefield, streaks of Magence weave a fractured tapestry across the sky. The high-pitched chittering of the Sar Ala collides with elemental forces, building into a crescendo of violence. Hordes of silver beasts swarm around the Maginist Tower, lashing out against the Maginists as they hurl Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Light, and Dark into the advancing pack. Amidst the chaos, four figures engage in a lethal dance of Magence and raw power—Benna, Kran, Darfor, and Danessa—felling creatures with methodical fury and relentless resolve. The massive form of the Tower stands like a defiant sentinel, its crystal surface catching flashes of energy and casting ghostly reflections upon the surging crowd below. Every creature, every Maginist, is swept into the chaos, the scale and sound an epic, unrelenting crush.

The Maginists push against the onslaught, their numbers almost two hundred strong, a brilliant surge of coordinated power and defiance. Elemental forces clash, intertwine, and explode in dazzling displays. Commands are shouted, barely heard above the chaos, while the vivid tang of charged air fills every breath. Together, the Maginists form a living wall, waves of energy crashing into the enemy. Sar Ala roar and hiss, many falling, many more pressing forward, a seething mass of vicious silver forms. In the midst of the pandemonium, the four High Council members are unmistakable, their presence both unyielding and dangerously precise. Each of them carves swathes through the Sar Ala, leaving a trail of vanquished foes in their wake.

Benna's chestnut fur bristles as he fights, ears alert, eyes sharp. Water and Air flow from his paws, each burst measured, each attack aimed to disable or destroy. He moves with a mix of instinct and strategy, knowing when to strike and when to retreat, his focus never wavering. Behind the mask of dedication, thoughts of his mate and unborn leverets flicker—worries of what may come, and a surge of determination to protect the future. He fights with more than Magence; he fights with the urgency of a father. His robe, more a cloak, shifts as he moves, adapting to his seamless transition from two legs to four, a constant, fluid barrage against the advancing Sar Ala.

Kran's presence is a volatile storm. His black leopard tail flicks with disdain, each curt movement calculated to maximize destruction. Fire and Air explode from his clawed hands, scorching the ground and slicing through ranks of foes. He holds nothing back, an embodiment of raw, fiery arrogance. The heat of his strikes illuminates his features, casting his proud visage in harsh, flickering light. Few words pass his lips, but the power of his attacks speaks volumes. There is an artful cruelty to his methods, an unyielding belief in his superiority. Creatures fall beneath his ferocious onslaught, leaving charred remains where they once stood.

A large black bat, Darfor is the dark, shifting shadow among them. His wings cut through the air, silent and strong. Smoke and shadows rise from his path, darkening the sky and the hopes of his enemies. His Dark Magence moves like a living thing, seeking and consuming, spreading confusion and fear among the Sar Ala. In the midst of chaos, he seems to float above it, an untouchable, relentless force. His strength is quiet, but each manoeuvre speaks to a depth of power that few can rival. He twists and turns, avoiding every attack with the grace of a creature who knows the night.

Danessa stands as a beacon of light in the storm. Their humanoid form is framed by white dragon wings, each motion filled with grace. They weave protective shields and healing spells, gentle yet unyielding. Light infuses every gesture, countering the darkness and destruction around them. In the heart of battle, they remain calm, their presence a soothing counterpoint to the fury of conflict. Their blonde hair and blue eyes reflect the purity of their Magence, while the white robe, leggings, and boots create an aura of otherworldly radiance. They protect their comrades, deflecting attacks, and nurturing the wounded back to strength, a luminescent force against the tide of violence.

The four of them together are a symphony of battle, each note resonating with lethal precision. As the Sar Ala advance, they adapt, their synergy an unspoken language of power. Fragments of dialogue break through the tumult, short, decisive words that direct and unite. Benna's voice carries authority; Kran's commands are clipped; Darfor speaks with quiet strength; Danessa's words soothe and encourage. Their attacks balance each other, a perfect, devastating harmony. Elemental energy crackles around them, the sky above a swirling mass of chaos, the ground below littered with the fallen.

But the Sar Ala are relentless. The silver horde presses in, a monstrous tide of alien forms. They move with a wild, vicious cohesion, surrounding the Maginists, adapting, striking with animalistic fury. To the enemy, this battle is not a strategy but a relentless, instinctual surge. They swarm the Tower, uncaring of their losses, determined to consume. Chitters, roars, and hisses punctuate their assault, a frenzied counterpoint to the measured defence of the Maginists. Even without Magence, their strength is undeniable, their violence brutal and overwhelming.

The clash of Magence and raw brutality intensifies. The battle's energy is electric, the noise a deafening roar. As the struggle deepens, both sides are locked in a desperate bid for dominance. The Maginists, with their elegant control, face off against the primal rage of the Sar Ala, and the battlefield is a storm of movement and sound, a cacophonous and epic confrontation where every moment seethes with intensity.

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No fire or water; no wind or light; only silence. For an instant, time snaps like a thread, and Benna finds himself spinning within the vastness of the void. Darkness—complete and eternal—yawns beneath him. A galaxy of battles, more ancient than stars, erupts into a scarlet frenzy, falling upon him, inside him, through him. The whorl of sensation grips him tightly before exploding into chaos. Everything rushes back, real and near, the noise and fury slamming into his bones with familiar violence. His eyes are keen. Two Sar Ala slip from the fray, more deliberate than the blood-hungry mass. With the urgency of discovery, he seizes his chance. The blue of his robe catches a spear of light, and he disappears.

Unseen, he cuts his own path. He flows like water and surges like air, each hop imbued with intention, every muscle straining with purpose. Without a word, his powerful haunches launch him into the turmoil, ears back against the ferocity, yet his awareness remains sharply attuned to the war cries of his companions, to the fates they may meet. But no other knows the fleeting direction of his heart; no other can trace the path he draws.

Blinding white light flashes above, arcing like the crack of a million suns; it sings the death song of a hundred Sar Ala before the ground itself erupts in heat and fury, a roar of molten rock filling the air. Benna moves through the cacophony, each leap measured, every motion smooth as polished glass. He catches sight of Danessa and Kran—a split-second of their clashing Magence—before he weaves into the darkness beyond. As it swallows him whole, the grip of his resolve grows tighter, deeper. He pursues only the silent treachery that waits.

Searing heat fades. Icy air rushes around him, laced with the distant howl of Sar Ala rage. His fur stands on end, charged with the electric presence of danger. With each leap, the cacophony behind him stretches thin, the howls flattening to whispers on the cold night. Shadows lengthen as he presses on. Silence presses harder.

Yet this silence has form, this night has shape. It comes not from the void but the pressure of his own design, expanding inside him with terrible insistence. He pushes faster, feels the spaces in between close tighter around him. The flare of Magence grows faint, distant, the light of their Magence fainter still. Only the empty frigid blackness lies ahead, and in it, the disappearing path he draws.

He sights them at a distance: two smears of silver against the void. The wind rushes in his ears. He moves as a storm, his limbs a blur of purpose. Uncertainty lurks, gnawing at his resolve, but Benna pushes forward, pushing against even the traitorous urges that would pull him back to the fight and the call of his friends. He is powerful. He is resolute. He will follow. He is alone.

His senses sharpen. A jagged hill of rocks, slicing the sky like jaguar teeth. Bodies, piled high, leaking their stars' blood into the Denaran earth. Robed Maginists surround it like vultures, besieged but unbroken. Darfor: a phantom among them, holding them to their ground. His sonorous voice rings in Benna's mind: A lone hare cannot catch the eagle.

Benna's hops do not falter. He leaps past the dark shapes of his comrades and quarry, vanishing once more into the waiting night. Again, the void grips him tightly; again, he moves like air and water, silence and shadow, tracing the path of a ghost. The faint, steady beat of distant roars, a heart that cannot quiet, travels to him through the air. A chorus of deep breaths rise in his chest to meet it.

He is so close, now. The creatures are larger in his vision, distinct shapes forming. Two Sar Ala, driven to be hunters, will find themselves hunted. His breath moves faster. His fur ripples in the icy night. His long ears fill with the rush of anticipation. He propels himself into the void, certain in the path he draws.

And then he isn't. They disappear before him, leaving nothing but empty black. He searches his sight, his mind, his heart for a trail, a hint, a glimpse. The darkness turns as real as the rocks beneath his feet. He cannot see them. Cannot hear them. Cannot feel them.

For a moment, for an eternity, he spins. There are no Sar Ala; there is no path. There is only Benna, suspended within the vastness of the void. The heartbeat falters; his blood stops moving. The night expands around him and inside him. Time stops. It will always stop.

But his legs do not stop. He is not a ghost. He does not trace his own grave. He is not from the stars. He is from Denara. A gasp of light pulls him to the surface of the night. A twist, a blink, and he is on the other side, an eternal instant away from defeat.

All at once, the world slams into his bones with familiar violence. The clamour of battle rises near, the void around him shrinks to nothing. White flashes, red arcs, darkness and light crashing upon each other. Benna can feel it all, coursing through his veins: the burning fury of Magence and Sar Ala, a fight to last the ages. He spins back into the galaxy of battles, tracing once more a path to follow.

It explodes into chaos. There is fire and water; there is wind and light. There is not silence. The galaxy of battles falls upon him, and through him, and inside him. He is within the whorl of sensation, then outside it, then of it again.

Two Sar Ala appear ahead of him: deliberate. He holds them in his sight, tight.

Benna seizes his chance.

## Chapter 2

Crystal refractions electrify the air, multiplying the frantic intensity of the battle as Benna pursues the retreating Sar Ala with fierce, unwavering hops along the side of the Maginist Tower. Chaos rises around him in blurs of motion and cries of agony, pulling him towards the most desperate sounds and keeping him to the rugged plinth of the Tower's base, where his four-legged form moves with calculated precision. He strains to ignore the dangers unfolding above him, aware that using his teleportation ability in such close proximity risks sudden, shattering death. Every leap captures the conflict within him, and he chooses each landing with an inner resolve that sharpens against the panic he will not acknowledge. The screams ahead tear through his remaining self-doubt, and he veers in a tense, controlled adjustment.

Feral shrieks cut the air, and the shapes of the silver-skinned Sar Ala are monstrous as they swoop past on relentless wings. Benna clenches his eyes, feels a rush of wind, then opens them in time to witness the gleam of their armour-like flesh as they circle above. They are empty of Magence, crude in their savagery, violent in ways that even the most monstrous creatures of Denara cannot match. Beside him, on the Tower's enormous crystal surface, light refracts from the luminous bodies of dead Maginists as their living comrades teleport them into the safety of the crypt, creating a harrowing dance of blurred colour and urgency. But Benna cannot afford such luxuries. One mistake, one poorly judged moment, and they will add his lifeless body to the grotesque tableau.

Maginists streak past him in quick, fiery movements, risking everything to battle their otherworldly foes with fierce blasts of energy. Screeches and screams meld into a grotesque symphony, pushing Benna forward with painful urgency. He clenches his jaw and leaps towards the sounds with determined intensity. Though everything around him is the very essence of chaos, he draws a steady course through it, concentrating on his path and choosing it with the same careful precision as he selects every word he speaks. A massive explosion booms above him, rocking the air and his certainty, but he sets his eyes on the

shapes of the Sar Ala as they vanish into the darkness behind the Tower, exactly as he knew they would.

His pulse quickens as he rounds the base, fighting to keep desperation and anger from consuming him. He cannot give in to those feelings; they will make him careless and ruin everything. Instead, he fixes his mind on what must be done, trusting in the same principles that have brought him through every crisis of his life: logic, patience, and relentless, unshakeable resolve. His enormous ears quiver as the shouts and sounds of the main battle slip behind him, replaced by the new, insistent cries of terror in the distance. His robe billows behind him as he accelerates with growing speed, his elegant, rhythmic motion matching the intensifying urgency within him.

Trees rise in dark clusters along the horizon, sending out long fingers of shadow that stretch through the gathering dusk. Benna feels a jagged spike of panic at the thought that he may not be fast enough. He wills his body to greater speed, aware that a single slip will cost him precious seconds that he cannot afford to lose. Then, through the sharpness of his fear and focus, he sees a blinding light. With sudden dread, he recognises the flash of Magence exploding through the air like a thunderclap, its colour bright and sickly with desperation. His heart aches as he leaps towards it, knowing that somewhere in the madness ahead, his mate is caught in a battle she cannot win.

Every yard brings more signs of the Sar Ala's rampage, and Benna finds himself tracing his path through ruined trees, wrecked as if by the mightiest of storms. Splinters of wood litter the ground, and even the sturdy trunks of ancient oaks are snapped like twigs. Broken branches dangle from others like gruesome fingers, some twisted into a grotesque lattice that traps the last light of day. But there is no sign of any Maginists. It is as he expected: the Sar Ala have drawn the best of them into their trap, then swept in for an easy slaughter. Now he must undo what they have done and get to his mate before it's too late.

The taste of dust and smoke is thick in the air as he races through the tangled woods, their warped shapes clawing at his senses. The chaos and ruin should disorient him, but he uses them to confirm his course and finds his pace quickening even more. He knows his heart is already halfway to the gardens, urged on by the sight of his family in mortal peril and pushed into overdrive by the fear that he will arrive too late. His vision blurs as he drives himself beyond the limits of what he thought possible, yet the scene ahead is one he never could have imagined. The broken remains of the Maginists who had come to Selar's aid are strewn across the open fields, their bodies soaked in blood. And in the centre of it all, his beloved Selar lies still and silent on the ground.

Benna lands at her side in one fluid motion, but his mind cannot accept what his eyes see. Her purple robe is torn and shredded; so too is her belly, their unborn leverets cruelly ripped and scattered from their haven. For a moment, he cannot move, cannot breathe, as his worst fear crashes over him like a crushing wave. The rest of the world fades away, and the awful truth of her death strikes him with more force than any weapon. He is helpless to stop the torrent of grief that crashes through him, and the screams that fill his ears are his own, torn from the depths of his being.

But even in this moment of despair, Benna cannot let go of his principles. He forces himself back into the present, back into his body, so that he can do what must be done. His heart is

breaking, but he uses it to propel him through the impossible task that lies before him. It is the only thing he can offer them now: the love and care that will make this tragic scene whole once more. With grim tenderness, he nudges the tiny leverets back to their resting place, cradling them within the protective warmth of their mother's body, before nuzzling Selar for the last time. Then, with every fibre of his being protesting the unbearable finality of his choice, he touches Selar's lifeless form and closes his eyes.

Magence surges through him, cold and bright as lightning. He holds his focus with a painful intensity, ignoring the wave of exhaustion that nearly pulls him under. But he knows he has done enough. In the stillness of the empty fields, his tears are the only testament to what was lost.

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Light blazes with a painful, cold intensity, surrounding the bodies of Benna's family as he utilises his Magence to transport them to the crypt. For a brief, agonising moment, it feels as if the brilliant flash has taken part of his soul with it. He collapses in stunned exhaustion, the breath ripped from his lungs and the tears from his eyes as he blinks into the sudden emptiness of the battlefield. Selar and the leverets are gone, leaving nothing behind but the vivid memory of his loss and the scarlet stain on the ground where they fell. Around him, the blood-soaked grass glistens with the aftermath of devastation, littered with the remains of his fallen comrades and the monstrous shapes of several dead Sar Ala. He sees everything in frozen, stunned detail, each horror-drenched image searing itself into his mind. It is the only soundless moment he has known since the fighting began. It ends with a shuddering breath as he lets out a furious cry, driven by anger and pain and a burning desire for revenge.

The air shudders with Benna's scream, then settles into an eerie silence, as if all living things are stunned into submission by the horror that surrounds them. The fighting has moved on, leaving only its gruesome evidence and a scattering of survivors. Broken and breathless, Benna remains alone at the epicentre of the massacre, surrounded by a massacre of Maginists, shredded trees, and dark patches of crimson earth. For an agonisingly long moment, he is too drained to move or think. His body and mind refuse to comprehend the scale of his loss. His world narrows to the single point of pain that was his family. Then it collapses to the wider circle of destruction and grief that fills every inch of the desecrated ground.

Benna breathes deeply, slowly, willing himself back to awareness as the tears stream down his face. He owes it to Selar to keep living. He owes it to himself to avenge what was taken from him. As those thoughts take hold, he feels the rush of returning life, a painful but welcome infusion of anger and willpower that pushes through his fatigue and despair. He takes in the vivid scene with new focus, forcing himself to witness it all: the colourless bodies of his friends and kin, torn open and lifeless; the discarded robes that identify the dead and dying in brutal purples, blues, and reds; the monstrous, silver-skinned shapes of the enemy, which were almost too quick for him to see but not quite quick enough to escape. He memorises each detail with ruthless determination, making a promise to every fallen Maginist that he will be the last to die today.

At last, the power of his grief gives him the strength to stand. He fights to control his trembling as he rises on legs still unsteady from the shock of his discovery and the weight of

what he must do. Exhaustion grips him in a desperate embrace, but he throws it off with a fierce resolve that is stronger than any Magence, more relentless than any attack the Sar Ala could unleash. Every second he remains here is a second wasted, a second in which the killers slip further from his grasp. His mind races ahead of his body, calculating the most direct route through the undergrowth and into the trees where they vanished, the only thought in his mind the certainty that he will find them. He begins to move, and with that first, painful hop, all of his emotions crystallise into a single, terrifying resolve.

He makes his way across the scarred and bleeding earth, searching for signs that will lead him to his enemy. The fields and woods blur past him, indistinct shapes of ruin and destruction that add fuel to his rage. He sees broken branches, splintered trunks, the blood-slicked grass where those with no regard for honour have carried out their ambush. A flash of blue catches his eye. It is one of Selar's would-be protectors, gasping and curled in the centre of a crushed thicket. There is still some life left in him. With a touch and a burst of Magence, Benna could help him cling to it. Instead, he keeps moving, aware that each second brings him closer to the vengeance he seeks.

The further he goes, the more he begins to see the signs of others who might have survived. Shallow breaths of the dying. The quiver of a paw. But each of those signs takes him further from his family, and each has the same silver glow around it: the taint of the Sar Ala, which only Benna can cleanse. Even if he saved the living, even if he returned to find them all restored and unharmed, it would not bring Selar back. He gives a hoarse cry of rage and grief as he pushes deeper into the fields and finds nothing but death and empty shadows where Maginists should be. Every body, every sight, every sound pulls him closer to his breaking point.

Then the flash of motion catches him off guard, so unexpected that he nearly trips over it in his reckless pursuit. In the distance, he sees the forms of Sar Ala. This time, they are not diving for the kill. They are retreating, retreating and regrouping, heading for the cover of the woods. The rage in his chest flares into something wild and raw and uncontrollable. They are within his grasp again. His speed increases, but his careful logic returns, guiding his path with unshakeable resolve. He leaps towards the moving figures with astonishing precision, his robe billowing like a battle-flag, his long ears flattened to his skull. There is nothing left in him but the desire to destroy them.

Other Maginists scatter along the path of destruction, alone or in pairs, some with wounds as deep and raw as Benna's own. He leaves them all behind in his relentless pursuit. Then he sees the shapes of two of the younger Maginists. They are alive, and they are fighting. His heart catches at the sight. They are alive, but they will not stay that way unless someone intervenes. The realisation stops him in his tracks, and for one agonising moment, he doesn't know which direction to take.

He closes his eyes and imagines the others converging on the area. They will find them, he tells himself. They will find them. His eyes snap open, and he is moving again, harder and faster than before. His breath comes in sharp, ragged gasps as he races towards the distant woods, towards the murderers, towards the only way to set this right.

With the death of his family burnt into his memory like a cruel brand, Benna does not stop for rest, or food, or to let the despair sink its claws too deeply into him. His ears, always at attention, scan for sounds of the Sar Ala while he breathes in their scent, the scent that has lured him through the woods for what feels like hours but is in fact only minutes. Even on all fours he is exhausted, but he pushes on, unable to consider the consequences of failure. They are here. He is certain of it. He dives deeper into the trees.

The sky begins to clear, but his head is filled with the clouds of sorrow. It has been like this since he found them—the too small bodies of the leverets, Selar motionless beside them. Their blood and fur fused into the earth. The memory fuels him now as he bounds through the woods, his feet churning up the dirt.

A blur of landscape streaks by as he picks up the pace, only an occasional cry of a wild bird rising above the sound of the wind in his ears. In his mind, however, the Sar Ala shriek at him, taunting, laughing, getting further away with every leaping stride. No! They are close. He knows it. His anger is too fresh to be wrong. He stretches himself to his limits and beyond, thinking only of his need to destroy them, all of them. Thinking only of revenge.

The ground beneath him begins to slope upwards, and he strains against it until he reaches the top of a small hill overlooking the woods. Here he stops, panting. With long ears quivering and elongated nose twitching, Benna's entire body becomes a radar. He holds his breath and listens for even the slightest sound. He tastes the air for a hint of Sar Ala. He gets something. It's faint, but it's them. The scent is definitely them. He lets the breath out all at once, rage burning in his eyes, and plunges back into the trees.

The descent is fast. Reckless. Unthinking. It feels as though a lifetime has passed since he lost everything, but it has been only minutes. Only minutes since the silver claws of the Sar Ala ripped his life to pieces. They will not do it to anyone else. Not ever again. Not if he can stop them. The scent is stronger now, mingling with the acrid smell of scorched fur that haunts him like an unwanted ghost. He's catching up, he's sure of it. A glance through the trees shows the horizon filling with stars.

Benna hears something and pushes himself even faster, legs and feet and ears all working at cross purposes as the Magence builds within him like a firestorm. They've slowed, he tells himself. They are tiring. He repeats it like a prayer, like a desperate incantation as he barrels forwards, past low branches and brush that threaten to grab him and hold him back. As if anything can hold him back. As if they can hold him back. The cowards! He can hear them just ahead now, their cries echoing off the trees. Or is it only in his mind?

He stops abruptly at the edge of a small clearing. All is silent, save for the rush of blood in his ears and the echoes of his own hoarse panting. His heart still pounds furiously, a painful reminder of its hunger. He surveys the area, searching for any sign of them. The woods feel too still, too quiet. The lingering scent of Sar Ala clings heavily to the air, mocking him. He knows this is where they were, and he can sense how recently they fled. He trembles with frustration. They could be anywhere. His thoughts again turn dark. He can almost see their sneering, tooth-filled grins.

The hare allows himself to sink down on his hindquarters as he catches his breath, still casting around the clearing for the silver forms he expects to see. Silver forms he longs to



see, longs to crush. All he sees are the twisted branches of old trees, their gnarled limbs reaching skywards like the bony fingers of the dead. Nothing moves but his chest.

The brief pause in his pursuit begins to eat at him, bit by bit. Maybe the sounds he thought he heard were not the Sar Ala at all. Maybe they were the whispers of his own despair. His own failure. Again.

Benna pushes the doubt away, buries it deep within the earth of his mind like so many bodies, and brings himself back down onto all fours. The ground is still damp with morning dew, clinging to his fur as he paces the clearing. How can it be so quiet, so still? The old trees loom over him, as if their branches are closing in, surrounding him like bars of a cell. As if they have been waiting all this time to close in. He feels like a prisoner of his own desperation. The very desperation that brought him here, brought him across the woods, across the brink of sanity, across every unfilled corner of loss. He cannot fail. He will not.

As if in defiance of the silence, he lets out an angry shout. He can feel the scream rise up from somewhere low within him, a broken beast wanting out. It catches on the wind and carries through the woods like a cry of death. He pauses to listen, thinking it might be joined by the cries of Sar Ala if they hear it. Thinking it might scare them, freeze them, bring them out into the open so he can strike. So he can kill. Instead, it seems to be swallowed up by the trees, digested, and returned to him as silence once again.

Then he sees it. There. Just out of reach. A silvery shape like a spectre haunting him, taunting him. It's the cruellest joke they could play, he thinks, but his determination is far greater than their cruelty. He will win. He has to.

His sharp eyes study the shape for a moment. It clings to the crook of a tree like some horrid ornament, a sick reminder of their savagery. An egg sac. A lump swells in his throat, and he isn't sure if it's the urge to shout or the need to weep. They took his family from him, so he will take theirs. He rears up on his hind legs, stretches his front paws up the tree, and reaches for the egg sac. The thin material feels brittle and weak in his paw. It is soft, delicate, fragile. It is everything he is not. Everything they made sure he was not when they took everything away. The sorrow, the fury, the memories—they give him strength.

His claws break the egg sac from the branch, and he watches with grim satisfaction as it tumbles to the ground. The urge to shout and the need to weep give way to a sudden resolve, a deep conviction. The Magence within him crackles to life. Destroying this is the least he can do, the very least. He will kill the abomination inside and let the others find it, let them know what it means, let them suffer as he suffers.

The soft material splits open with a wet crack, and he startles backwards. Then it happens again, this time with more force, more urgency. A claw! It's definitely a claw, slicing through the egg sac from the inside. The creature frees itself almost immediately, tearing at the silk with a viciousness that surprises even Benna. More claws follow, and the egg sac is soon in tatters, shredded like his memories of that night.

The rage swells up within him, along with an unexpected confusion. He'd expected something else, something different. Something less complete, less developed. Not this. Never this. Eight long legs ending in hooked claws. Two antennae protruding from its head.

Instead of mandibles or a proboscis, a mouth brimming with sharp teeth and fangs. And eyes—multifaceted eyes that reflect his own failure back at him, a thousand times over.

He regains his senses and snarls at the creature. His anger gets the better of him, as it often does, and he reaches deep into the core of his being to call upon the Magence. Water and Air at the ready, he turns back to the youngling. There is no hesitation in his paws, none of the uncertainty that haunted him only moments ago. This time he will not let it escape. He will not allow it! He prepares to strike.

But as he moves, as he gives himself over to the vengeance he craves, something happens. Something strange. Something impossible. The creature looks at him, looks into him, looks through him. He can feel it probing his mind. This isn't right. The Sar Ala have never done that before. Never. It's something only Maginists can do. Benna pauses, stunned. No. It has to be some sort of trick. Some elaborate ruse.

Before he can come to grips with this revelation, something even more startling takes place. The creature begins to change. Not gradually, not as if it has planned this metamorphosis. This is different. This is an unexpected unfolding, as surprising to the Sar Arsam as it is to Benna. He watches in shock as the arachnid form begins to shrink. As the spindly legs melt together. As its features turn soft and round, vulnerable and almost innocent. A child! he realises, breath catching in his throat. The thing is turning into a child!

The Magence retreats within him as his paws fall slack and heavy before him. Benna's long ears are pricked straight up as he cautiously approaches the shape lying face down in the grass. The child is not moving, and it almost breaks him to see it like that. He lets out a soft, hesitant breath and carefully turns it over. It's a boy. A baby. He's beautiful, with curly silver hair and bright silver eyes. Benna is unsure, his grief and anger now joined by an unexpected companion: doubt. Can he do this? Can he really kill something so helpless?

The hare studies him, letting a little bit of everything sink in. Letting everything he's been through rise up within him. A tangled ball of memory, like threads twisting together, tighter and tighter until they snap, releasing something deep within. His hatred is not enough to kill the child. His pain is not enough. But something else is. Something that feels too much like love. He cannot do this. Not to the child, not to himself. It will not make things better.

Benna closes his eyes and breathes in deeply. It's not just the scent of Sar Ala anymore. It's something sweeter, something purer. The scent of promise. He lets the anger leave him all at once, allows it to be replaced by a different resolve. The seed of doubt shrivels and dies, replaced by something tender and new. He decides to adopt the child. He will keep it as his own. He will keep him as his own.

Elias. The name floats into Benna's thoughts like a gentle wave, bobbing up and down in the back of his mind, inviting him to reach out and hold on to it. Hold on to something. He can see a trace of his family in the child's silver eyes, and it comforts him in ways he cannot explain. This will be his purpose now. Elias. The Magence swells within him again, this time with warmth instead of fire, with joy instead of vengeance. With the pain of remembrance instead of the pain of loss.

His paw glows as he wraps the newborn boy in a soft blue blanket and makes a sling to carry him home. He knows teleportation is too risky with one so young. He knows also that his forelegs are not suited to cradling a baby, especially on the long journey back to the Tower, especially on such an important journey, especially with such an important child. This is not an easy decision, but it is the only decision he can live with.

The doubt that was planted in him, that everything planted in him, it's gone. The anger is gone, and a new conviction takes its place. A conviction wrapped up in a soft blue blanket and safely cradled against him. He hops away from the clearing, knowing this time he won't be hopping away from everything else.

This time, it's with him.

Home.