

Tab 1

## Prologue: the weaver sleeps

"Hey... hey! Sira! Have you heard this story?" Aelirya whispered, her nose still buried in a leather-bound book.

They say that a long, long, *loooong* time ago, there were three gods: *Aurenel*, the Goddess of Light and Mercy; *Nocvyros*, the God of Darkness and Suffering; and the Father of the Gods, *Eirothein*!

My mama says people call him the Keeper of Threads or the Weaver of Time. It's said he's the one who weaves everyone's fate — even before they're born.

But... Eirothein got really sick and disappeared from this world. He fell into a long sleep to recover.

When he went to sleep, he left his two children in charge: Aurenel and Nocvyros. At first, they worked well together and were glad to have one another. But they say Nocvyros grew jealous of all the love Aurenel received.

In a jealous rage, he proclaimed he would cast never-ending darkness over the land.

And now, the dark pestilence kills and destroys everything in its path — even other gods.

Eirothein is still sick, and the two deities are still at war with each other to this very day... or so the story goes.

The words hung in the air as Aeliyra lowered her book, her starry eyes locking with Sira's rich, earthy gaze..

Sira let out a sigh and adjusted her glasses.

“Lirya, I don’t believe in fairytales, and neither should you. They’re made to scare kids like us so we’ll listen to our parents—and, like, not smoke siltleaf or veilsbane.”

Aelirya blinked at her, then narrowed her eyes with a half-smile.

“Sira, we’re literally ten. If we don’t believe in them, then who will?”

“Hmmm, let’s see...” Sira smirked and gave Aelirya a sideways glance. “Fools and morons.”

Aelirya rolled her eyes and turned back to her book of fables and myths, trying to tune out Sira’s endless skepticism.

“Anywayyy, I’ve gotta go. My mom needs help with cooking since my trash brother is coming over, so I’ll see you later,” Sira muttered as she moved to the edge of the bed and began gathering her things.

still keeping her attention on her book aeliyra replies with a question.

“Hey, you wanna hang tomorrow and practice our spellcasting again?” Aelirya asked hopefully. She had always loved magic and knowledge—ever since she’d felt something open deep in her soul, a sudden firing of synapses in her brain.

A spark.

A flare.

A glimmer.

...A flicker. She first felt it at eight years old, she'd been trying to refine her *aetherin* every day since.

Sira looked over her shoulder with playful frustration.

“Ughh, no. ‘Cause every time we do, you lose control of your aetherin and end up burning something—or almost freezing me to death.”

“NO I DO NOT!” Aeliyra’s eyes widened, stung with offense.

“Oh, is that right?” Sira strutted across the room, pulled back the lacy pink curtains above the white vanity, and pointed out the window toward a row of trees—either scorched black or sheathed in jagged ice.

“...Okay, but that’s not my fault. I’m still learning.”

“Girl, whatever, I'm not here for all that lying you're trying to do.”

They both laughed at the sight of the ruined yard before saying their goodbyes. And when the room fell quiet again, Aelirya was left with only her book and her thoughts—thoughts of sleeping gods, endless wars, and the hero she hopes she might one day become.





## Chapter one

A soft morning glow filtered through the lacy curtains, brushing Aelirya's narrow eyes awake. The subtle brightness coaxed her eyelids to flutter open, stirring her into a hazy awareness.

Without delay, the morning routine began. Aelirya swung her legs over the side of the bed, her bare soles meeting the cool, polished wood floor. She drew in a deep breath, her full lips parting as she murmured,

“Okay, time to start the day!”

She stood from the bed, the soft shift of her nightgown whispering against her skin.

She journeyed into the hallway as she thought of her next steps.

The routine was simple—boring, even. And she hated being bored. So, she added a magical twist.

Face washed, teeth brushed, hair styled, and uniform laid out—all by her own spells: a touch of water, a levitation spell, and Helping Hands.

"There. Perfect."

She darted to her room and pulled on her academy uniform: a white button-up with gold insignia-engraved buttons, tucked into a sky-blue ruffled skirt. Calf-length ruffled socks and black Mary Janes followed.

Every student was allowed one "personality accessory." Hers? Two satin ribbons tied neatly around her twin puffs.

She was ready for the day.

Aelirya twirled out of her room, sunlight catching the hem of her skirt as she skipped past her mother's closed door. At the front entrance, her sisters were already waiting.

"Honestly, Rya," Jo huffed, arms crossed. "You're late. Again."

"Relax, Jo," Aelirya said, brushing past her. "I'm not even walking with you today. I'm meeting Sira." At the door stood Amjolyn, the eldest, with their baby sister Ambryael's small hand curled in hers. Both wore the same dark-trimmed uniform as Aelirya, polished and proper.

"You could've told us," Amjolyn said sharply. "We've been waiting like fools. A little courtesy wouldn't kill you."

Aelirya rolled her eyes. "It's really not that serious. Just go already. You only want to start something." Amjolyn opened her mouth to respond, then paused. Her jaw tightened, but she said nothing. With a short nod, she stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind her, Ambryael trailing quietly at her side.

The house fell still.

Aelirya slipped through the back gate and started down the wooded path behind their home. The trees arched above her like watchful sentinels, filtering the morning light into shifting gold and green. As she walked, her thoughts wandered-imagining herself as a powerful witch, cloaked in mystery and feared by kings.

She didn't even notice how far she'd gone until the path opened up, revealing a crooked little house nestled in the

roots of an ancient oak. It leaned slightly to the right, as though listening.

She knocked.

"Who is it?"

The voice was low, slow, she couldn't imagine who the voice belonged to and made her stomach twist.

"H-hi... I'm here to see Sira. We're walking to the academy...?" A long pause. Then the door creaked open.

A man stepped into view—shirtless, lanky, tattoos winding up his arms.. One of them, a spider on his hand, seemed to twitch with his movement. His eyes swept over her like he was trying to figure something out.

"Well, look at you," he said, his tone strange and syrupy. "Didn't know Sira had such polite little friends."

She shifted her weight, unsure what to say. Something about his voice made her want to disappear. He noticed and raised his hands, grinning.

"Don't get all nervous. I don't bite or anything. I just don't like people knocking on my door this early. But you—you're all right."

Before she could answer, Sira's voice cut in like a blade. "Mama's door. Not yours. You don't even have your own place—or a job. Or soap, apparently." Sira stepped in behind him, eyes narrowed and her jaw was set hard,

but her knuckles whitened where her hands curled into fists.

The man gave a long sigh and rolled his eyes. "Sira, why do you always have to act like a brat? This was an A and B conversation, not an invitation for you to show off in front of your friend. Maybe if you weren't so rude every time you wanted attention, you could try being cute and quiet like your polite little friend."

Sira's glare held, though a flicker of unease passed through her eyes. "You're so weird," she said flatly. Then, to Aelirya: "Let's go."

Aelirya sat frozen. Some primal instinct kept her rooted in place, though she didn't understand why. What's going on with me?

"Aelirya!" She snapped her head to the left. Sira's dark eyes met hers.

"“I said we’re leaving,” Sira snapped, tightening her grip around Aelirya’s hand.

They marched off, hand in hand. As they walked, Aelirya noticed two things—one intrigued her, the other made her stomach turn.

First, the house. That crooked little house had always been creepy, but today it felt... different. Its left-leaning frame no longer seemed like it was lurching toward its next victim, but instead crawling away from something unspeakable. Something vile.



Second, the lanky man. He was watching them. And when Aelirya met his gaze—he winked.

Her stomach lurched. She turned away, nauseated.

“Sira, who was that?”

Sira didn’t answer. Her silence—so unlike her—made Aelirya’s gut tighten.

Something was wrong.

“Sira!”

“WHAT!”

Sira yanked her hand away, the gesture sharp and frustrated.

Aelirya recoiled. “I asked who he was.”

Sira froze. Then, slowly, she drew a long breath, pulling herself back from the edge. When she spoke again, her voice was lower. Controlled.

“That,” she said, “was a walking piece of garbage I’m ashamed to call my brother, his name is Daran.”

Her gaze dropped to the ground. Her eyes seemed to darken as they fixed on the grass at her feet.

“I’m sorry you had the displeasure of meeting him,” she muttered. “I... forgot we were walking together today. I overslept.”

Aelirya studied her, confused.

Why is she so apologetic?

“Hey, it’s okay. I forget things all the time. Besides, I like learning new things about my friends—good or bad, it’s all part of you.”

Rya gave Sira a warm, concerned smile, which Sira returned faintly.

“Rya... I’ll tell you why I hate my brother so much, but it has to be later. Come over for dinner tonight and I’ll explain everything, and...”

She trailed off, lost in thought.

Rya adopted a playful grin.

“Hm, I don’t know. It depends~ Is Miss Monroe making her roasted boar again?”

“Ugh, fine. Just come over, okay?” Sira’s voice carried an edge of desperation.

“Girl, of course I will. But we should probably get running—we’ve only got five minutes to reach the gate before Mr. Humblfort shuts it for morning classes.”

Panic flared across Sira’s face, her doe eyes going wide.

“WHAT? WE WON’T MAKE IT IN FIVE MINUTES. WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO—JUST DIE, I GUESS!?”

She paced frantically over the lush grass, her white Mary Janes brushing against the blades.

Just then, stars lit up in Aelirya’s eyes.

“Never fear, fair damsel, for I have the solution to the problem that plagues your heart!”

“Are you capable of doing anything normally, or is that some kind of mental defect?”

“Ugh, you’re so lame. I have an idea—well, half an idea. I’ve been working on a speed incantation, but with my flicker-level magic, it’ll only last a few moments.”

“That’s okay, ’cause I’ve got the rest of your idea. Now listen up...”

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Moments later, the girls bolted down the grassy forest path, dodging mossy trees and startling woodland creatures. Nothing slowed them. Every puddle was leapt, every branch dodged, until at last the academy’s gates came into view.

“Almost there—but not close enough!”

“I know!” Sira called over her shoulder. “Wait for my cue!”

Thirty seconds until the gates closed.

“Annnnnnd—”

Ten seconds.

Aelirya’s face tightened with worry. “Sira, now?!”

Five seconds.

“SIRA!”

“NOW!”

In that instant, Rya began to chant. A faint golden glow shimmered around their feet.

“Faster than wind and quicker than storm—carry us faster in rapid form!”

Mr. Humblfort began to close the gates as he spotted  
Two figures shot through the narrow gate like arrows  
loosed from a bow—

BANG!

They tumbled hard at the feet of the towering statue of  
Headmistress Valuma Vale, the first and most venerated  
headmaster of A.M.Y

Stars and planets spun above their heads in a dizzying  
haze. When their vision cleared, a tall shadow loomed  
over them. It was their magical engineering teacher,  
Tomas Humblfort.

“Well, well, well, Miss Johnson and Miss  
Jaemar—cutting it close, aren’t we?” Mr. Humblfort  
twirled his gray mustache between thumb and forefinger,  
eyes twinkling.

“Sorry, Mr. H,” Sira mumbled. “We didn’t want to get a demerit and have our stuff confiscated.”

Rya threw up her hands. “Exactly! I can’t afford another one. I’m this close to convincing my mom to buy me a Scryingglass Zeta! And if Sira gets another demerit, her mom says she can’t come over anymore. Do you know what that would do to us, Mr. H?!” Mr. Humblfort let out a sigh that slipped into a groan.

“Well, ladies, you wouldn’t need to worry about demerits if you just woke up early and got here on time.”

Aeliyra and Sira stared at him blankly.

Suddenly—

“PFFT—HAHAHAHA! YOU’RE SO FUNNY, MR. H!  
HAHA, EARLY HE SAYS—HAHAHA!”



Aeliyra doubled over, clutching her ribs in uncontrollable laughter. Sira and Mr. Humblfort only exchanged a confused glance, then both seemed to silently agree: Aeliyra was ridiculous.

“Hooo,” Aeliyra wheezed between gasps. “That’s why they pay you the big bucks, Mr. H—comedic genius!”

Sira blinked at her. “...That was funny to you?”

“Anyway,” Mr. Humblfort cut in, “you should get going before I give you half-demerits for A.M.Y. Rule #137: *informal speech with an authority figure.*”

The girls froze.

“...That’s not a real rule... right?”

“Hmm. Would you like to find out?” His eyes twinkled with false menace.

“BYE, MR. H! SEE YOU IN SCIENCE IN MAGIC CLASS!” the girls shouted in unison, scurrying off at the veiled threat.

Once they were out of earshot, Aeliyra groaned. “Ughhh, I hate this merit system. Like, yeah, it’d be amazing to learn a spell from Headmaster Rufflegrey—he’s a fifth-spiral mage!—but five merits takes forever to earn.”

“Girl, tell me about it. And the demerits are worse. We’re supposed to earn five merits, but every demerit takes away privileges, so we’re just falling behind. First one’s a write-up, second one’s losing class equipment privileges, and the third...” Sira shuddered. “Only the gods know what happens after three.”

Both girls exchanged a grim nod, then shivered dramatically.

“Anyway, Rya, I’m heading to Magirithmetic. Don’t forget—you’re coming to my house tonight.”

“I won’t. Now go before we’re really late.”

They performed their secret handshake and split ways, off into the chaos of the school day.

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The school day ended quicker than Rya expected. When the bell rang, she raced through the pillared halls laced with enchantments and out the main doors in the direction of the school’s statue she landed in front of hours prior. She spotted her sisters just beyond the golden gates—the same enchanted ones she and Sira had

raced through that morning, now glowing faintly in the evening light.

Jo and Brae were already there.

“Wow,” Jo smirked. “Didn’t think you’d actually be on time for once.”

“Shut up. Let’s just walk.”

The road home stretched longer than it should have, cobblestones warm with the day’s leftover sun. Lanterns with timed light magic flickered awake as dusk crept in. No one spoke until Rya finally gave in.

“Hey, Jo... so I’m, like... y’know...”

Jo glanced over, sighed.

“It’s fine. Forget it. Being inconsiderate’s your job as the little sister.”

Laughter broke the silence. Brae laughed the hardest, her voice scattering the awkwardness into the night air.

Aelirya burst into her room, threw on her dinner clothes, it was the prettiest dress she owned, maybe it was too pretty, and darted for the door.

A hand clamped her arm. Mama.

“Where are you going right before dinner time?”

“I’m sorry, Mama! I forgot to tell you—I’m eating with Sira and her family tonight. I wasn’t being sneaky, I swear. We just talked about it at the academy.”

Her mother froze, lips pressed tight.

“Is that brother of hers home?”

“Yeah... why?”

“Then no. Stay here and eat with us. It’s short notice anyway.”

“What!? Mama, that’s not fair! Just because he’s there? He didn’t even talk to me.”

Mama’s gaze softened, then darkened. Aelirya’s bright, desperate eyes told her she’d been waiting all day for this. But her gut screamed otherwise. Letting her go felt like sending her daughter into the wolf’s jaws.

“Mama, please! You’re being paranoid. Miss Monroe will be there, so I’ll be safe!”

...

“Mama?”

Her mother exhaled slowly. “...Fine. But no sleeping over. Back here at seven. EXACTLY. Do you under—”

“THANK YOU, MAMA! I LOVE YOU! I’LL BE BACK AT SEVEN!”

Rya skipped triumphantly out the door, through the gate, and down the grassy dirt road. After that point, her memories of the night grew hazy and dark—but she remembered the night sky on the walk there, and the scent in the air.

The sky struck her as nothing short of magical, like a canvas painted by the gods themselves. Spring was thick in the air—floral and earthy, fresh and wild—and she breathed it in like a promise.

“It’s going to be a good night.”

If only she’d been right.

She reached that crooked little house and noticed—it still looked like it was running away. Always caught mid-step, like it wanted to flee but hadn’t decided where.

This time, though, she paused. From a distance, she peered into the windows. They looked like eyes.

She stared deep into the house’s soul.

She thought it stared into her, too.

She walked.

And walked.

And walked.



Then knocked.

The door opened swiftly.

Rya was greeted by a plump, pleasant woman.

It was Miss Monroe.

“If it isn’t my other daughter. I see you two love making plans on your own—otherwise I would’ve set a place for you,” Miss Monroe said, her tone warm but playfully scolding. “Well, it’s not too late. Come on in and have a seat while I finish up here.”

Rya stepped inside and was kissed on the nose by the scent of herbs and roasting meat.

The house was lit comfortably with easy light magic, casting a soft, golden glow across the room. It was furnished in that particular way that made anyone feel at

home—without trying too hard. She made her way to a worn brown couch and threw all of her weight onto it.

She sank, like a rock into fresh snow.

The couch was plush, wide, generous with space. You could tell it was made for a large family—or one that wished it were.

Dinner passed uneventfully—comfortably, even. Rya noticed how Daran and Sira played the part of affectionate siblings. Played being the operative word. It was clear they were putting on a show for Miss Monroe, who seemed to be the thread holding everyone together. Still, the food was undeniably good.

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“Phew, Mama, I swear you are the best damn cook on this damn planet,” Daran said, unbuckling his pants to give his stomach some room to breathe.

“Daran! Watch your mouth in front of my babies.”

“Oh, come on, Mama. They’re smart, mature young women—they can handle a few potty words.” He winked at them, and both girls visibly shuddered.

Sira quickly changed the subject. “Mama, we’re gonna head to my room and relax a bit.”

“Alright, but Rya, remember, sweetie—it’s 6:10, okay, honeybun?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you,” Rya replied politely.

The two girls left the kitchen, already chatting about school as they disappeared down the hallway.

“Oh shoot, I forgot to ask my mom something. Can you wait in the den for me? I’ll be right back.”

Rya lifted a brow. “Why can’t I just wait in your room?”

“It’s... uh, it has a lot of clothes everywhere. I was doing laundry...”

Liar.

“Okay. I’ll wait here.”

Aelirya knew she was lying. But she didn’t know why.

If only she had asked more questions.

Maybe then—

The door creaked open.

Thinking it was her friend, she lit up like a new Evemas tree.

But then she saw it: the tattoo.

A spider—one that moved and breathed as he moved and breathed.

“What are you doing in here alone, Caelaria?” His tone was syrupy. Sickeningly sweet.

“Caelaria? My name is Aelirya. Who’s Caelaria?”

Her heart began to race.

“A Caelaria is a mythical songbird from the western region. It sings the most beautiful melodies,” he said, drifting over to the red boar-leather couch she was sitting on.

The door clicked shut, sealing the tense air inside.

Tension and anxiety wrapped sharp threads around her heart and lungs; every breath slow and deep. Each gasp, a plea for wind and whisper.

“Why’re you so far away, Caelaria?”

She flinched slightly at the sudden sound of his voice.

Each word, sticky and slow, clung to the insides of her ears like mold in the corners of a damp basement.

“Am I? Haven’t even realized. I’m just sitting, y’know.”

She didn’t understand.

She couldn’t understand.

How had her once proud, boisterous voice become so tame—so trembling?

Her mind drifted to a mirror transmission she'd once seen in school: a beautiful cage built of honeyed lies and soft hands. At first, it didn't even know it had been caged until it was too late.

It was trapped.

She was trapped.

She turned her head—he was at arm's length now.

When did he move?

Why did he move?

Why?

Why?

Why?

“You can keep a secret, can’t you, Caelaria?”

Everything was black.

The next thing I remember is fire and a voice.

—do.

“WHAT DID YOU DO—”

The sound of birds chirping and the smell of breakfast greeted her out of the painful nightmare.

She woke.

Then she walked.

Her mirror displayed a face aged by seven years, panic-stricken and sweating, her heart still racing from the horrible reality her brain had forced her to relive.





## Chapter Two

Sweat streaked her face, breath shallow, dragged from the nightmare she couldn't escape. She threw her blankets to the side and rapidly stood as she walked to her white vanity, the white paint now chipping, revealing rotting wood.

“Night after night—why the fuck do I keep seeing it?” she muttered in the mirror. ”

. Her harsh exhales were panicked and shallow, just as they had been in her memories of that awful night. She takes a few deep breaths then glances up at the top of her head in the mirror.

“If you weren't part of me, brain, I'd think you hate me. But you know. You do.

She rubbed the dream residue from her downturned eyes, her knuckles brushing her long lashes as she re-centered herself.

“Liya, let’s go—you’re going to be late for work.” A curvy woman stood in the doorway, speaking in a hushed tone. Her brows raised and eyes tired.

“Mom, I had the nightmare again. Every night it gets worse, and I remember more and more. This time I remembered—”

“Stop! I do—I don’t want to hear more. Just get ready.” Her exit was swift.

Aeliya scoffed, muttering a mock imitation of her mother under her breath as she dressed for work.

There was no magic in this routine—no spark, no flair. Just slow, unmotivated motions. She moved plainly, mechanically. Her hair and face were done in the usual way, and breakfast was nothing special: a slice of toasted pryn nut bread, still warm in her hand.

As she stepped out the door, she paused and turned to the mirror hanging on the wall behind it.

It was just her.

She left the house to start her day.

She ventured down the stone path, one heeled boot in front of the other. Her ponytail—lazily tied and threaded with miniature braids—caught in the crisp gust. Each whisper of the new season slipped cool fingers beneath her brown-and-green thryllweave coat and matching high-waisted skirt. The warmth enchantment on her

stockings and bodysuit was enough to keep her safe from the bite and breath of the Bountide season. The walk to the bookstore was beautifully uneventful. She soaked in the melodic chirping of the wudfellors, their golden-tipped feathers catching the light. Each shift of the seasons tugged her back to the days when she and Sira would chase tree warblers just to startle them, laughing at the strange little cries they made when frightened. A soft chuckle slipped from Rya at the bittersweet memory. Her head began to hurt and her heart started to ache.

She missed sira.

Her feet carried her out of deep thought, and before she knew it she was stepping onto the white stone step, gazing into the polished glass of The Sleepy Satyr.

Pushing open the door, she was met with the gentle fragrance of paper and sippa, which caressed her wide-button nose. The scent embraced her—soothing, familiar—whispering comfort straight into her soul. She breathed it in. Now she was ready for whatever the day might throw at her.

Almost anything.

