

Prologue

Aurora

Aurora sat on her bed, fretting and worrying. Tomorrow she'd be off to school, the famed Aprean Royal Magic Academy. Her mother's years at the academy were famous—Selene Celeste Fonix's admittance had been followed by a series of adventures that Aurora would've thought fictional if it weren't for the fact that most of them were verified by lots of people. A kidnapping and a month's absence from school, a discovery of not one, but *three* heritages left hidden for decades. Not to mention the ordeal with the Fairy Flower and all that "saving Aprea" jazz. Not to mention that her mother was the founder of The Order of Halflings, even if she had retired from her position when Aurora was very young. Apparently, there were plenty of other things that had happened on the sly.

Aurora's father was famous, yes, but he was just a candle next to her mother's raging fire of a reputation—Selene Celeste was the stuff of legends. And how could she ever live up to someone like that?

Flopping back onto her bed, she groaned into the pillow her face was currently buried in, and kicked at the air like a little child. Her large suitcase was in one corner, packed and repacked and packed again, and the guitar Uncle Matthew had made her for her birthday two years ago was propped against the wall in its case. Her violin case was leaning next to it. She'd been assured that Blayze, her mother's familiar—a pheonix immata, in other words, a firebird—would be able to bring her things if she managed to forget anything. But she took after her father, and didn't like to have things out of place.

She heard a shout and a boom on the other side of the house, feeling the vibrations from here. That'd be Zeeke, her seven year old brother, upset about going to bed again. Out of her eight siblings, Zeeke had the worst temper, and tended to make things explode with his magic. Entirely by accident, of course. He was a handful, and the only one who could really manage him was Seraphina, Aurora's twelve year old sister, and their mother. Seraphina, as her father put it, was much like the motherly side of Selene. Although she had no magical abilities, she was very good with children. She also had the weirdest understanding of the most abstract sorts of magics. Aurora glanced over and saw the little stack of fancy notebooks Seraphina had given her. She knew how much her sister loved writing music, and had given her the perfect gift—half of the notebooks had blank music note lines.

After a while, the house quieted as her parents and Seraphina got everyone into bed. Aurora sighed. According to her father, bedtime was much quieter at the academy. Aurora wondered if she'd miss the hustle and bustle of her crazy family. She'd see her father regularly, of course, since he was one of the professors, but she'd only see her mother and siblings when she came home for Midwinter Break, at least until summer vacation. She'd be pretty much alone for months, because she knew nearly no one, kid-wise, at the academy. Her oldest younger brother, known as Kay to his friends and family, wouldn't be joining her until the next year at the academy.

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Aurora was glaring at the clock. It was exactly 1:17 a.m. She hated having insomnia. It always got worse when she was worried and stressed, too. She sighed and clicked on her lamp. She might as well make edits on that song that was her current work. It was for her cousins' birthday; the March triple's (Arthur, Kai, and Lilith) were a little older than Kay, but not quite as old as she was, so both Kay and herself were friends with them, though they'd be going to the academy this year as well. But they were good friends, and technically the children of her great aunt, who was the same age as her mother, so they were related in some way. It was kind of confusing to explain.

The song she was writing was a fun, upbeat song, fitting for the triplets. She had the tune down, but the lyrics still needed some work so they'd flow properly. She had purposely put her desk on left side of her bed. It was perfectly placed to where she could use it from her bed—mid-night wakefulness wasn't an uncommon occurrence with her.

About twenty minutes later, there was a soft knock on the door. *'Knock-knock knock-knock-knock knock-knock, knock.'* So it was her mother. Only her mother knocked like that. Her father told him that it drove him nuts back when they were in school—an unnecessary amount of noise, he said, because she never did anything softly unless she absolutely had to. Aurora had been informed by her mother that the knocking was simply to annoy her father. Her parents had an...interesting relationship.

"Come in." Aurora said, careful to be as quiet as she could be. Even though the only other people who slept in this hall were Kay and Raye (she was twelve), who slept like the dead, it always felt strange to be loud at such a quiet time of night.

The door slowly opened, not making a sound—Aurora often snuck outside to sit on the summer nights where sleep evaded her, and thus the hinges were always properly greased. Her mother appeared, hair in a sleep-mussed braid, tired yet awake eyes, and her customary smile graced her lips. Her belly was huge, larger than Aurora had ever seen it—at seven months pregnant, her mother was even larger than she'd been with the twins, John and Eli—and there was a tray balanced on one hip, forcing her to slip into the room sideways. She shut the door behind her, pulling her wand out of her waistband and muttering a spell that would make the room soundproof from the outside. Aurora shook her head—both Aurora and her father were forever telling her mother that wasn't a good place to keep her wand, but her mother was more stubborn than a mule when she wanted to be.

"Couldn't sleep?" Her mother glided over to the desk and set down the tray, which contained two steaming mugs and a plate piled with various snacks. Even when heavily pregnant, her mother moved with a grace Aurora could only hope to master one day.

Her mother said it was because the wind liked her and helped her out. Her mother also said fire was fun. Her mother always said the strangest things.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tactlessness was something she shared with her father and uncle.

Her mother chuckled, “I guess so, deario. I’m going to ask the obvious again—would you like some hot chocolate? It’s just the way you like it...” she trailed off temptingly.

“Of course!” Aurora laughed. As much as she loved her father’s tea, her mother’s hot chocolate couldn’t be beat. She scooted over to allow her mother to slide in next to her, making an oomph sound as she settled. She handed one cup to her daughter and took the other one for herself. They sipped in silence for a few moments before her mother gasped, grabbing Aurora’s hand and pressing to her stomach. There was a weird movement that fascinated Aurora.

“The little munchkins are restless too, it seems.” Her mother laughed, “Or they might just be hungry.” Setting down the cocoa, she grabbed a brownie from the plate, taking a large bite and ‘mmm’ing. Her mother normally ate like a quickly growing teenage boy, packing down more than everyone else in the house, including her father, who wasn’t a light eater. When she was pregnant, she ate twice as much—when she was with the twins, it was three times as much. But with this pregnancy, she was eating even more than that. No one knew where all the food disappeared to, but she was constantly eating. No human, even when pregnant, should be able to eat that much. She burned through food like a bonfire does dry grass. Aurora had always wondered if she wasn’t quite human, eating so much. Was she just completely hollow?

She handed another brownie to her daughter, “Don’t tell your father, mind. It drives him crazy when *I* eat late-night snacks, but he likes it even less when I let you munchkins do it. Life lesson, Rory: men will never understand the cravings of woman. No matter how many times you try to explain it. It’s just not going to happen.”

Aurora laughed. Her father was constantly complaining about her mother’s late night raids of the kitchen. Her mother replied that he could stop her if he wanted to, but it wasn’t her fault he could sleep through a hurricane. Her parents were always bickering, but Aurora believed that the two just liked the exchange of clever remarks (or, as often in her mother’s case, remarks that made no sense but still made her win—merely because her father wasn’t sure how to respond).

“I’m going to miss hearing you and dad bicker. It’s so funny, particularly since you both do it more than any of your kids.” Aurora said.

“I completely agree. To me, getting your father worked up like that is the most amusing thing I’ll ever be able to do. Before he met me, no one really back talked to him—at all. I thought it was funny to do then, and I will always think so. I’m still pretty much the only one who does, even now. Some people still think he’s scary.”

Aurora shuddered as she remembered her father’s anger when he found out some kids were bullying her several months ago. Those boys got the scolding of a lifetime, to say the least. “He is when he wants to be.”

Her mother nodded, “Only when he wants to be, if you really know him. Can I trust you with a secret? I was hoping to keep it from everyone I could so it’d be a big surprise when it

happens, but I *reeeeeally* want to tell you—but only if you can keep it from everyone. If you tell any of your siblings, they'll tell your father, and he's the one I *really* don't want to know."

The girl nodded eagerly, suspecting that this was another one of the ridiculously funny jokes her mother was always trying to pull on her father. It only worked about half the time, but the results were always fantastically hilarious.

"Okay, so I went to see Aunt Miwa today," Aunt Miwa was the medical wizardess that had seen Selene through all of her eight pregnancies and births and was the doctor for the entire family. Her mother glanced at Aurora's clock before continuing, "Well, *yesterday* would be more accurate, but I gave in and told her I wanted to know if I was having twins or not, and what genders they were and whatnot." Aurora nodded—this was typical of her mother, though her father refused to learn the gender until they were born. "And so, I told your father it was twins, a boy and a girl. He sighed and gave me a resigned nod."

"Umm, okay?" So what was the secret?

"I lied."

Aurora gasped, "What?!"

"I'm having triplets. Two girls and a boy."

"No!"

"Yes. And I can't *wait* to see the look on your father's face!"

They both giggled about this. Whenever her mother was in labor, her father was a complete panicky mess and had to be removed from the building until it was over. In fact, her father was really against having more children—nine was enough, he had argued. Let's just say Mom won that fight. How he'd react to not only *two* more children, but *three*...that'd be a sight to see. Of course, he'd love them as much as he did all his other children, which was to say, more than anything, but he would be faced with half of the workload ahead...how he'd react to that realization would be hilarious.

"Wow, mom. Just...wow. Poor Dad." Aurora snorted in a very unladylike manner, not sounding all that pitying of her father.

"Can you blame me? It's only getting harder to ruffle his feathers!"

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, finishing up their cocoa and bingeing on sweets.

"Nervous about school?" said her mother.

She inhaled, "As can be. You and dad have both gone down in the history of the school, accomplished amazing feats, and done impossible things. Now, I've got to go. I won't know any of the students—well, except for Zave Jr., but he's two years older and he's really not a people person, and then the triplets—but they'll all know about my parents. I'm so scared that it'll be isolating. That I won't be able to measure up to the expectations people'll have of me, coming from this family. I mean, I'm not even that great at magic, like Kay, or Raye, or John, or Eli, or even Jayce! I'm not even all that great with people, like you and Sera and Rosa!" She was

babbling, she knew. But her mother was very good at listening when you needed her to. When she babbled herself out, she left out a big breath, feeling lighter than she could remember lately.

Her mother wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to her side, stroking the hair of her oldest child. “Oh Rory, I can see why you’d feel that way, but you shouldn’t. Sure, you may not be as good at things as some other people are, but you need to remember that you’ve got talents too. Out of all the children I’ve birthed, and you know that it’s many, with more to come,”—she gestured to her swollen belly with her free hand—“you’re the only one who’s able to sing, and appreciate music the way you do. Your siblings may like listening to music, but each and every one of them is tone deaf.” She winced at some of the memories of music lessons, “Sure, Johnny boy may be able to play the violin decently, and maybe one day Rosa’s piano talent will evolve past banging out Twinkle Twinkle, but you, my dearest darlin’, can sing better than I can. Not to mention you can actually read music *and* play the violin.”

“That’s not true!” Aurora exclaimed. She could only hope to be half as good as her mother one day. “You’re the best singer I know!”

“Only because you neglect to include yourself. You have just as much talent as me, but you work really hard at it. Hard work beats talent if talent doesn’t work hard, you know. And remember, I’ve been doing it far longer. But if you compared a 15-year-old-me to right-now-you, you’re better than I ever was. Take pride in your talents, accept your weaknesses, and be happy with who you are. Otherwise, you’ll be pretty miserable—like I am on rainy days.” They both laughed. Her mother hated rain, and overcast skies, and cold, and anything remotely like it. It made her lethargic and apathetic and gloomy, the complete opposite of her normal self. “See? That’s better. Your father doesn’t quite get my philosophy, though. He thinks that hard work overcomes anything, no matter your limitations. In many situations, that’s pretty true, but you also need to be happy with who you are and the progress you’re making at your own pace.”

Aurora smiled, “Thanks, Mom. I’ll try to do that.”

“And as for living up to what your parents have done, you should do that easily. I wasn’t the best student when I started out—my grades were pretty cruddy, and I was so far behind everyone else. Did I tell you that, up until I was almost 17, my magic was entirely self-taught? And that I did a not-so-good job teaching myself?”

Her daughter’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

“Not in the slightest. In fact, if it wasn’t for my buddy, I doubt I’d’ve passed the trial.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. In fact, I think you’re old enough to hear the unedited version of the story. One of my friends from Terra, who goes by the pen name of Authoress, as she wishes to remain anonymous, helped me record it. The stories were getting so twisted and embellished that I thought history should be helped before the truth is forgotten.”

“Dad knows about this particular venture, doesn’t he?” It wasn’t uncommon for her mom to go off and do the most random things and never tell her father until afterwards.

“He does, actually. He’s a pretty big part of it, after all. It’s still a work in progress though, so we’ve only got a bit of it done. It’s most likely going to end up being really long. But I think it’ll be worth it—no more having to explain things over and over and *over*...I’ll just be able to say ‘go look at this or that and be done with it’~.” her mom sighed. “That’d be nice. We’ve dubbed it *Elemental*, mostly on your father’s suggestion. It does have a ring to it, I’ll admit. It’s better than Uncle Keagan’s name—he wanted to call it some really long name that I can’t even remember and that was *really* literal.” She rolled her eyes when she said that—Uncle Keagan was terrible at naming things. There was a reason Aunt Zelia named all their children.

“That does sound like a bit of a daunting project. What about the things you forget?”

“That’s what Aunt Zelia is for. With her special magical talents, bringing up memories, unaltered, is a piece of cheesecake.” She glanced at the clock and recoiled a bit—it was nearly two-thirty. “Yikes. We should probably try and get to bed—your father does wake up on occasion and I’d rather not deal with the grump. You know how he hates mornings—it’s even worse in the middle of the night, believe it or not.”

Aurora pouted—she really wanted to hear more about this project. But, she knew her mother was right. She was more than most people realized, it seemed. “Okay. I don’t want to be tired on my first day.”

“Righto, Rory. Though technically tomorrow is your first day—you’ll just be meeting your roommate and the like today.” Her mother gave her another one-armed side-hug, “And don’t worry, I’ll slip you the first part of the story before you get on the train tomorrow. Most likely, it’ll be hidden in your lunch—Daddy dear won’t find it there~!” Seeing as her father was banned from cooking because he was such an epic failure in the kitchen, and tea-making was his only talent in that area. The man once burned instant pudding, for crying in a bucket! Even to this day no one could know quite how he did it, particularly as he refused to talk about it.

Her mother kissed her forehead and got out of the covers, gathering up wrappers and the two mugs and putting them on the tray. Before she left, she tucked Aurora into bed and turned off the lamp. Normally, she would’ve rejected the gesture, claiming she was too old to be tucked in like a little kid; for now, though, she’d let her mother do it. Who knew when the next time she got this comfort from her mother would be?

Her mother slipped silently out the door, breaking the spell with a little ring she always kept on her pinky. When she shut the door, the only light was a little of the half-moonlight coming in through the window. Aurora fell asleep thinking about her conversation with her mother. She’d always gotten along a little better with her father, but there were some things only your mother could help.