

LBRIS

We know  
books

SARAH A PARKER



THE  
WINTER  
WHALE



HARPER  
Voyager



*The world began with five.*

*F*irst was Caelis, God of Aether, invisible to the naked eye. The empty space nobody thought about. Where matter formed, he was simply shoved aside.

His baritone song was so full of substance, yet lacked it entirely. A lonely echo that haunted the empty space between near and distant suns – inaudible in its depth, no matter how loud he sang.

Desperate to be noticed, it was *he* who offered an empty canvas for the others to fill.

Bulder, God of Ground, sculpted the sphere with one belted bellow, building a sturdy globe that did not spin. A world half bathed in sunlight, sprinkled with a rich ripple of rust-colored sand, the other half eternally dunked in shadow so thick it seeped into the stone and cast it black.

With more blunt and droning words, Bulder sculpted the terrain, creating dips, dollops, and cracks in the world. Forging a wall that cut through The Fade – where sunlight and shadow refused to meet – the sky a forever splash of pink, purple, and gold.

The Goddess of Water came next.

Rayne fell upon the ground in a billion yearning teardrops of unrequited love, puddling in Bulder's dips, filling his gorges with her gushing affections. Upon the shaded side, she descended in a patter of heavy flakes, dusting the sharp mountain ranges in a frosty hug.

Her love was a screaming torrent. The deep, gut-wrenching wail of an avalanche. The near-silent cry of sprinkling rain.

Her mournful song was so unlike that of her sister Clode – Goddess of Air – who hinged on the precipice of immeasurable madness. Her voice was a ribbon of silk, soft to touch, unless it turned to the side and slit you with its edge.

Her whispered words swept past branches laden with leaves, tilling them into a flirty dance. Her violent *shrieks* ripped around sharp corners at a voracious speed simply because she liked the sound. Unable to stand Rayne's somber still, Clode's gusty howls often churned the Loff into a heaving mass that dumped upon the shore like a drum.

Ignos was a glutton for Clode. The God of Fire feasted on her. Consumed her.

Loved her so much he could not *breathe* without her.

His searing song was one of ferocious hunger and impassioned greed, but Clode could not be tamed by his rabid affections, even as he blazed jungles and gave her smoke to dance within. Even as he melted bits of Bulder's stone until they were molten rivers of red, desperate to woo Clode with volcanic blasts that shook the sky.

Bound to his mournful solitude, Caelis watched this all, jealous of the other Creators for their ability to be seen, touched, or heard, but thankful to be part of something.

Anything.

And he watched in quiet wonder as, upon this lush and fertile canvas he'd gifted his emptiness, life *bloomed*. A various cacophony of folk who littered the land and snow and sand – some with hearing sharper than the tips of their ears, making them privy to the four other elemental songs. A number of whom learned their languages. Spoke them.

Found *power* in them.

Others fell upon a silver book some say Caelis wrote in his desperation to be heard. Who found a different form of power in those runes nobody could read or pronounce, discovering that the strange markings could be *wielded*. Could mend bones, charm blood, glamor objects . . .

Many beings filled all corners of the world, but none the Creators were more proud of than the great winged beasts that lorded over the sky.

The *dragons*.

Upon the seemingly uninhabitable crown of The Burn, where the sun's harsh rays bubbled skin into fleshy welts, the Sabersythes *thrived* – big, bulky beasts with black and bronze and ruddy scales. With ferocious aptitudes that could not be matched.

They made Gondragh their spawning ground.

Some folk were brave enough to venture close. To raid a nest and snatch an egg.

Brave . . . or *stupid*.

Less volatile than their distant kin, the Moltenmaws found their home in The Fade. In Bhoggith – a foggy scrap of marshland that gobbled almost everything in muddy, sulfuric burps.

Their honed beaks were sharp enough to *slash*, their claws just as severe. Veiled with feathers as colorful as the ever-vibrant sky in their part of the world, no two Moltenmaws bore the same glorious palette.

To steal a Moltenmaw's egg, one also needed to be brave or stupid . . . but perhaps a little less.

Netheryn, however, was almost impossible to raid – the chosen spawning ground of the ethereal and cunning Moonplumes.

Being farthest from the sun, Netheryn was the darkest crown of The Shade, bearing a cold so deep it could turn the blood of most common folk slow and sludgy. But not the Moonplumes, with their luminous, leathery skin so chill to the touch. With their long silky tails and eyes a crush of glitter and ink.

Tucked amongst snow and ice and a hungry quiet that swallowed sounds then spat them out like a warning roar, the Moonplumes *flourished*, growing in number, strength, and brilliance.

Only those as unhinged as Clode or bearing enough power to protect themselves would attempt to steal a Moonplume egg . . .

Most failed, consumed by the fearsome, thrashing beasts or the hostile land.

Some succeeded – a celebrated few who used the dragons to wage wars for sprouting kingdoms.

But as castles grew taller than mountains, and as kings and queens decorated their crowns with bigger, sparklier jewels, so too did folk learn how to shed dragon blood.

For many Moonplumes, Moltenmaws, and Sabersythes . . . their eternal lives were slashed.

The Creators did not expect their beloved beasts to sail skyward upon their end. For many of them to plant themselves just beyond gravity's grip, curl into balls and calcify, littering the sky with tombstones.

With *moons*.

They certainly did not expect those moons to fall not long after they found their lofty perch. For them to collide with the world in a clash of splintering doom that threatened to devastate everything that had come to be.

It took seven moonfalls before Clode, Rayne, Ignos, and Bulder realized Caelis was to blame. That his empty space which yearned to be filled was strong enough to displace a dragon from its resting place and rip it from the sky.

It took them yet another moonfall to devise a plan to save the world they loved so much.

Wielding empty promises and faithless vows, they lured Caelis into their trap and captured him.

*Subdued* him.

They sang their whipping, burning, breaking songs, mincing Caelis's essence into pieces small enough to trap in a cage of ebony crystal no larger than a pip, henceforth known as the Aether Stone. Threads of his silver cloak tore free as he thrashed and fought, but the other Creators did not bother to round up the scraps, leaving them to tether to both poles of the world. A luminous aurora that spun around the globe, giving folk something to track their daes and slumbertime.

Caelis himself was set within a sterling diadem embellished with a collection of runes that bore malicious strength. Enough to keep him trapped within the stone for eternity, so long as the runes had something to feed on.

*A guardian*.

A mighty fae warrior known for his strength and wisdom was bestowed a gift from the Creators themselves: power immense

enough that he was able to host the Aether Stone upon his brow and keep Caelis contained. A gift that passed down his familial line like skipping stones.

Many aurora cycles passed, and more moons littered the sky . . . Stayed there.

Peace eventually reigned, despite a slew of tragedies and ill-timed deaths that swallowed the Aether Stone's catastrophic origin, its very meaning for existence becoming a scrambled myth passed around campfires or sung to babes to hush their fussing cries.

Until one aurora rise, for the first time in more than five *million* phases . . .

Another moon fell.



Raeve  
**CHAPTER 1**

5,000,165 phases *After Stone*

I curl my shoulders forward, crumbling my posture into something that appears trodden.  
Scared.

Rounding a corner, I step onto the stairwell's bottom landing, chased by a parchment lark that flutters so close I'm surprised it doesn't nudge at me to pluck it from the air.

As I twirl the thin iron ring on my middle finger, my gaze climbs the heavily armored guard blocking the gloomy tunnel ahead – arms crossed, his shaved head almost brushing the curved ceiling, a flock of parchment larks nuzzling the door at his back. He's twice my size, boasting a scowl that appears to have permanently dented his face.

His disapproving leer comes to rest on the nick sliced into my left ear, up near the tapered tip. Like somebody with a tiny mouth bit a chunk from the outer shell.

My *clip*.

'No token, no entry,' he grinds out, immediately dismissing me as a lesser. A *null*. Someone who doesn't hear any of the four elemental songs.

I reach into my pocket, retrieving the stone token embossed on both sides with the prestigious club's insignia – a maw of stalactites biting in from all angles. Forging the slightest tremble, I hand it over, feeling the male's probing perusal cut me up and

down as he flips the token, his blue armor clanking with the motion.

I'm curious to know why he lets the larks flock the door rather than allow them straight in, but *Raeve* is the outspoken one, and I'm not *Raeve* right now.

'I'm *Kemori Daphidone*,' I say, tone soft and submissive. 'Traveling bard.'

'From where?'

'Orig.'

A wall settlement I've never been to, not that it'll stop me from rattling on about it if he asks for specifics.

Preparation is my armor. Don it or die.

He inspects the token, handing it back with a gruff 'No veils.'

I glance up at him from beneath a blaze of feather-tipped lashes. 'Part of my act. I'm part of the scheduled entertainment.' I retrieve a roll of parchment from my pocket and nudge it toward him. 'I was warned about the no veil rule, which is why I've only covered the bottom half of my face.'

Scowling, he unravels the scroll, his beady leer raking over my letter of hire so painfully slow I start to get a crick in my neck, impatience gnawing at me.

Finally, his eyes widen with recognition. 'Oh, you're the stand-in!'

I offer a shy, demure nod when all I really want to do is bang his head against the wall.

Hard.

He rerolls my scroll and hands it back, stepping aside to open the door. 'Third level. Mind the waif. It's always extra hungry this late in the aurora cycle.'

My shiver is far from fake.

I move into the *Hungry Hollow's* warm, smoky embrace, attacked by a rush of dense musk and the undertow of sulfur, the door banging shut behind me and the flock of dispersing parchment larks. Through a dark tunnel, I emerge at the pinched mouth of a vast, lofty cavern the shape of a stony lung.

A swoop of steps leads me onto one of the many paths that web through a cluster of luminous springs, steam rising from their turquoise depths. Folk are draped against their steps, heads tipped while they languish in the lapping warmth. A pretty paradise for

those who wield enough power or political sway to keep themselves on the cushioned side of The Crown.

I huff out a bitter laugh.

Here, it's easy to pretend our colorful kingdom isn't nesting on a bed of bones.

A freestanding staircase leads to the second floor supported by mossy pillars. I head for it, weaving along the labyrinth of paths when a waft of steam congeals into a pale, lanky creature with eyes like ebony jewels.

'Shit,' I mutter, pausing.

Head swiveling unnaturally, the waif looks right at me, sniffs the air, then releases a gluttonous gasp. 'Well, well, well . . . isn't your soul a plump, *juicy* thing?'

Ahh.

'How kind of you to say. I'll just be on my wa—'

'There are screaming spirits desperate to speak with you. How about a small suckle of your soul?' the creature asks, and I swear it sounds like it's salivating. 'Then you can hear *everything* they have to say.'

*No fucking thank you.*

'I'll pass.'

Heartily.

Seeming to ignore my objection, it flits forward, gathering wafts of steam it uses to stretch in my direction, vaporous fingers reaching.

I spin on my heel and hurry down another path, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. Looking over my shoulder, I spot the creature, now hunched over a male lazing against a spring's edge, sucking something shadowed from between his parted lips.

A shiver nettles my skin.

I quietly thank the Creators that waifs are rare, haunting only drapes of mist where they nibble souls in exchange for messages from obliging dead.

Can't think of anything worse. I'm certain the spirits so *desperate* to speak with me have nothing nice to say.

Not that I can blame them.

Thankfully, the creepy soul-nibblers are easily distracted.

I dash up a staircase, rising well above the reaching fingers of steam. The sounds of laughter and clinking glasses come to me as I emerge onto the second level scattered with Skripi tables.

Folk are gathered about, puffing smoke sticks, drinking sparkly spirits, game shards fanned close to their chests. Dice scatter, piles of dragon bloodstone shoved from hand to hand.

I cast my furtive gaze over their attire, some garbed in colorful, gem-encrusted gowns. Others wear finely tailored coats, feathered shapes barbered into shorn hairstyles, elemental beads hanging from their lobes. A boastful token of their ability to hear the different elemental songs:

Red for Ignos.

Blue for Rayne.

Brown for Bulder.

Clear for Clode.

Beads aside, you can usually pick a high-ranking Fade elemental from the other side of a room: those who boast more than ten colors on a single outfit, as if it'll make them mighty like the vibrant dragons that lord this kingdom's skies.

The great *Moltenmaaws*.

Funny, since they'd be the first to bleed the beasts if the bloodstone mine ever ran dry.

I'm halfway up a thin staircase chipped into the back wall when somebody tall, broad, and cloaked charges down from above.

I pause, unable to see much of his face bar his strong jaw brushed in a dark, well-shaped beard, his cloak's hood casting everything else in shadow.

He doesn't slow. Just keeps stalking down the stairs despite the fact that I'm dressed in a bold, bright-red gown impossible to miss.

I almost grit my teeth, remembering the metal cap coating my back molar *just* in time to avoid an impromptu activation of my secret weapon.

He barely fits on the staircase *himself*, meaning moving past each other is going to be a tight shuffle.

Lovely.

*Typical elemental bullshit, only thinking about themselves.*

Sighing, I curl my shoulders further forward and step to the side, reminding myself that I'm Kemori Daphidone, traveling bard from Orig. I'm trodden. Scared. And I'm absolutely not here to *accidentally* trip this male and watch him tumble down the stairs.

Absolutely not.

Back pressed to the wall, I keep my eyes down and wait for him to squeeze past, his heavy steps growing closer. So close I'm

struck with a smoky musk pinched with the smell of freshly split stone, softened with notes of something buttery.

My breath catches, then shudders free, as if unwilling to part with the dense, luscious scent that might just be one of the best smells I've ever inhaled . . .

He steps to the side, edging past.

*Pauses.*

I'm caught in his shadow like a flame in the dark, my heart pumping hard and fast. Nudging up my throat with each lengthy second that ticks by.

*Why isn't he moving?*

I sidestep farther up the stairs, edging free of his atmosphere. 'Excuse me.'

*Places to be, hands to sever.*

A dense, grated sound crumbles out of him, like it wrestled loose.

The air shifts.

I shift with it.

Whipping around, I snatch his wrist with the speed of a lightning strike. Tension clogs the air, my gaze dropping to his large, heavily scarred hand – outstretched, paused midmotion, as if he were just about to grab my veil and rip it free.

The asshole.

Though I can't see his eyes, I feel his penetrating stare with such probing intensity my lungs pack full of stones, the trail of his attention traversing to the rounded nick in my ear.

Back to my eyes again.

Sharp words gather on my tongue like thorns that I'm so, so tempted to spit at him. Then I remember that folk who stand up to high-ranking elementals end up as dragon chow.

I swallow the words instead. Something that never feels good, no matter how often I do it.

Loosening my grip, I dip my head and shuffle back a few steps, only stopping once I'm high enough that I'm looking down on the male. Far enough away that I'm less tempted to punch him in the throat for thinking he could *unveil* me.

'Apologies,' I bite out, trying to sound submissive. Failing miserably. 'The veil is part of my act.'

Silence ensues, thick like a tacky syrup.

*Move, Ravee.*

Easing free of his reach, I spin, hurrying up the staircase.

I don't look back, flashing my scroll and token at the second wave of stone-faced guards, one of whom breaks away to escort me toward the stage. I'm led into the shadowy den, engulfed in the scent of peat smoke and mead, struck by the dramatic shift in atmosphere.

Stone fangs jut down from the ceiling, cutting the space into arched segments brushed in rusty firelight spilling from blazing sconces. Dimly lit booths line the outer walls, bracketed with heavy curtains offering privacy for those who seek it. Null servers glide through the space, carrying trays topped with mugs of mead and other foggy beverages, dishing them out to jovial elementals gathered around stone tables pocked about the place.

Tucked in the guard's shadow, I cut a shrewd glance over the eclectic patrons, frustration chewing at my nerves when I don't see the face I'm looking for.

*Please be in one of the booths.*

The guard leads me toward a central dais crowned by numerous stalagmites that resemble the bars of a cage, and I almost laugh – only because I couldn't imagine anything more morbidly appropriate.

A thin, fine-boned female sits on a stool within, holding a white fiddle etched in luminous runes that probably encourage its sound to carry. She wears a simple full-bustled gown similar to mine, but blue, and much looser around the discreet swell of her babe-laden abdomen.

Eyes closed, she carves a melancholy tune while flakes of white light fall from the arched ceiling like a spill of snow. They settle on her gush of pale hair, extinguishing.

Thanking the guard, I step up and perch on the stool beside the musician, her song reaching a lilting crescendo while I search for an amplifying stick.

'Their Runi's working on it,' she whispers, lowering her fiddle, looking at me through piercing green eyes framed with blue feather-tipped lashes. 'It was cutting in and out last cycle.'

*Ah.*

'Shouldn't be long. I'm Levvi, by the way.'

'Kemori Daphidone, traveling bard from Orig.'

She flashes me a friendly smile that melts a little when her stare snags on something behind me.

My heart leaps into my throat as a red-haired male strides past,

weaving between the crowd, dressed in an immaculate sanguine coat – the color a perfect match to his red elemental bead on boastful display.

Relief prickles through me, eager anticipation making my hands clench and unclench.

*Tarik Relaken.*

He takes us in, a hungry leer that slithers over my corset-clad bust before he continues toward a booth, three other males lounging within. Leaving the curtain open, he pours into animated conversation, sliding the occasional glance my way. Half-lidded looks that paint me out to be a well-presented piece of meat he'd love to gnaw on.

*I see you, asshole.*

I catch sight of the cloaked male I encountered on the stairs, now moving through the dusky space—

My heart plummets.

He navigates past other patrons, my mind tangling into a messy knot while he makes for an empty booth at the back of the room . . .

He was in such a hurry earlier when he almost barreled over me on his way down the stairs. Now he's back. Why?

Business? Curiosity? Or did he catch the wrong impression from me on the stairs?

Creators, is *that* why he's come back in? Because he likes slumming it with nulls and he's hoping for an easy lay?

His head turns in my direction, gaze sweeping across the upper half of my face like a warm, soft-bristled brush, stiffening the air between us.

I swallow a groan.

I fought hard to have this operation approved. It means *everything* to me. If that asshole ruins our carefully laid plans, we may not get another chance for who knows how long. Assuming another attempt is even *approved*.

'You new, honey? I haven't seen you here before.'

Forcing my regard to soften, I look at Levvi, her null clip evident in the ear poking free of her luscious mane. 'Just standing in.'

'I see.' She passes a glance around the room, lips barely moving as she whispers, 'That male with red hair who just walked by? His name is Lord Tarik Relaken. Stay well away. Many performers draw his attention, then disappear.'