

THE
INCREDIBLE
JOURNEY
OF
SASKIA
STORMWEATHER



JAMIE BURGESS

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A novel by Jamie Burgess

1. In The Beginning

Aji was made Queen at the age of 13. By the age of 15, she was with child and as luck – or fate – would have it, on her 16th birthday she gave birth to a son, Aveija.

She considered blaming her youth, the fact that she had spent so little time personally raising him, but the undeniable truth was he was always wilful and stubborn since his very first breath. His nurses and teachers (and the entire nation) agreed, Aveija was more than a handful... and now he was a teenager, a 16 year old himself... and he had stolen a ship.

“Shall we pursue him My Queen?”

The Sky Knights were assembled, their commander standing before her resplendent in his crystal armour while the other eleven knelt at her feet. The Commander smiled as he spoke, perhaps betraying a little too much excitement for the impending chase.

“My Son is no stranger to these skies,” Aji responded truthfully. “Let him steal a thousand ships.”

“But My Queen?” The commander cautioned.

“He merely seeks my attention. He has it. Let us not encourage him to fly any faster. We don’t want him to break anything do we.”

The Commander motioned to the other Knights, “We should follow. It is a dark night, he will undoubtedly find trouble.”

“He’ll find trouble when he gets home.” The Queen waved her hand over the gathered knights, dismissing them all. “I am tired of chasing him. He is old enough to leave, so I will send him. After all, at his age I was a parent.”

Aveija grappled with the helm of the skyship. The winds were a torrent buffeting the starboard side, and no matter how high the ship rose it seemed Aveija could not escape the storm.

Phaedre, his mage, emerged from below and half ran half flew across the deck towards her Prince.

“Any higher would be foolishness!” She called to him, clutching at her pearlescent cloak as it snapped and rippled in the current. “We must return or the ship will be torn apart!”

“The ship is the strongest in the fleet! I’m unbreakable!” Aveija shouted victoriously.

“You’re insane!” Phaedre called, as she lost her footing and was swept by the wind, colliding with her master as he wrestled with the wheel.

“Hold onto me!” Aveija smiled at her, “We’re going into the clouds!”

Phaedre squeezed her eyes shut and clung on to Aveija’s body like a cat that had somehow found itself up a terrifyingly tall tree. “I hate you!” She shouted through gritted teeth.

Aveija pulled back on the wheel with all his might, and the ship lurched and creaked, old wood groaning against the weight of the wind. Two of the lift sails snapped free of their masts

and whipped dangerously into the furious sky, but the ship still ascended steadily, and miraculously remained in one piece.

As the ship pushed into the cloud, silence descended and the wind disappeared. All was covered in soft mist that caught the moonlight, and now there were no stars and no earth below, just softness and glittering light.

Aveija breathed out and let go of the wheel, and Phaedre released herself from him.

“Hate me? I don’t think so.” He smiled as he turned toward her.

“You could’ve killed us both!” She hit him as hard as she could with both her fists, right on the chest.

“I told you to stay below!” Aveija laughed, brushing off her punches as though she were a child. “I was going to summon you when we were up here.” He caught her hand and pressed his wrist against hers. “Isn’t this romantic?”

Phaedre couldn’t help smiling, “It is dangerous to linger in the clouds.”

Aveija raised his eyebrows suggestively, “Dangerous *and* private. Nobody can see us.”

“You’re a lunatic. You know that?”

“If I’m crazy, it’s because of you.” He said, reaching out and touching her hair.

They kissed then, the teenager and his first love, who was old enough to know better than to go gallivanting through the skies with her student... but right now she didn’t care.

Avejia pulled at Phaedre's cloak. "You're wearing far too many clothes," he whispered eagerly.

"It's freezing up here." She replied laughing, and started unlacing her dresses beneath the warmth of the cloak.

"I love you." Aveija said, and the silence around them deepened, and the moonlight shone brighter. Phaedre stopped fumbling with the laces. She suddenly felt foolish and naive. She couldn't bear to look at the earnest boy standing in front of her.

"You are just a boy. You don't yet know what love is." She turned away solemnly, perhaps to return below deck... and that's when she saw them, three tendrils of cloud spinning themselves into forms, just steps away from her and the Prince.

"Below! We must return below!" Phaedre turned back to him urgently and threw herself at the helm.

"Of course I know what love is," Aveija quavered, his eyes welling up with tears. "It's you."

"Open up those pretty eyes!" Phaedre shouted, spinning the wheel, turning the ship back to where they had come from, "we are not alone!"

Avejia blinked, his sight adjusted, and there in front of him three beautiful women swirled out of the glistening mist into focus... "Phaedre?!"

Instantly the Sirens set upon him, and Aveija felt himself surrendering willingly to their sighs and soft touches, however, being a woman – and therefore immune to the magic of the Sirens – Phaedre did not see three women, instead she could see the reality. Tendrils of dark smoke violently snaked into Aveija's wide open mouth and nostrils, thick ropes of stormcloud

coiled around his body... he was hallucinating, slowly being suffocated and drawn by the cloud-creatures across the deck.

Phaedre plunged the wheel forward and the ship dropped from the cloud cover, out into the stormy night below once more.

“Release him!” She cried to the Sirens, and flung herself at Aveija, trying to knock him to the ground, to save him from being dragged overboard.

One of the forms hissed at her and a tentacle of inky cloud shot out from it, thrusting into her, flinging her back against the ship’s wheel. The deck dropped away – the ship now diving catastrophically toward the earth. Phaedre cried out painfully and fell to the wooden boards. There was only one chance now, one spell that would release Aveija from the clutches of the clouds and save his life. Now she knew absolutely that she had confused duty with love. She did not love him, but yes, she would give her life for him all the same; he was her Prince, he was her Master. She lifted her wrist to her mouth and bit into her own flesh, drawing blood. In a moment she unlaced the front of the mage-cloak that was wrapped about her, and pulled it from her body, dousing it in her blood. She cried out the words she had learned to the wind as she pierced one eye with her sharpened thumbnail, and no sooner had her tears rained onto it, she threw the cloak toward Aveija’s failing body.

The cloak sparked as it flew, blood and tears and ancient magic combining and combusting. As the magic took hold of it, it was as though a hundred hands pulled the cloak tight, and it fell upon Aveija and the shifting forms of the Sirens like a wave of energy.

There was an explosion somewhere below deck, the ship was falling from the sky and nothing could save it now. Phaedre clung onto the wheel, watching with her one remaining

eye as the cloak swallowed up the form of her Prince. She watched as claws made of dark mist grabbed at it and ripped it into a dozen pieces, as though the insatiable Sirens thought they might somehow find their victim hiding within the very weave of the fabric. Finally, Phaedre closed her eyes and let go of the helm. The sky around her filled with the screams of the Sirens as they poured themselves out and around the ship like a huge writhing snake, then tightened their grip until, with a shuddering crack, the skyship tore in two and crashed in flames to the ground fathoms below.

The Watchers had told her what they had seen, and after she dismissed them all, she went outside and sat on her balcony alone, staring out beyond the walls of the city into the dark horizon, scanning the night sky for some sign of truth of what they had said.

‘Was it an accident that the ship had crashed? What was he thinking taking a vessel like that out into the sky alone? Was he even alone...?’

Tears hadn’t come yet, only an emptiness in her stomach, the feeling of being hollowed out. Surely if he was dead she would’ve felt it? Surely she would’ve felt *something*? Was he not her only son, the blood and water of her own body? Her mage had foretold that mother and son would change this world together, not her alone, or he without her – together. Her mage had never been wrong so far. She stood up and summoned him by pressing the insides of her wrists together – the pulse that joined him to her. She would find out more about this accident. And she would question *his* mage Phaedre... *Avejia*... no, it hurt her to even think of her son’s name yet. She strained her eyes, willing them to see a hint of rising smoke, or the

glow of some distant and disastrous flame, but there was only darkness, complete and moonless.

The door behind her slid open. Her mage Destre greeted her, rubbing sleep from his aging eyes.

“Aji, is it early or late?”

“I have grave news.” She took a deep breath. The air was cold. She pulled her nightgown close around her, “Avei...” but of course she couldn’t utter his name... “*My son* is dead.”

“What?” Destre looked confused. He shook his head, “Dead? No.”

“The Watchers came to me and woke me. The ship he stole fell from the sky not half an hour ago,” Aji turned away from him. “Did you foresee this?”

“Avejia is not dead My Queen. I heard him crying out in Phaedre’s room on my way up here, I swear it.”

Aji would not believe it until she saw him with her own eyes. Immediately she swept past him, through her apartment and out into the courtyard that connected her and her family’s quarters. She didn’t wait for Destre to accompany her, she didn’t even call for a knight to escort her, she simply turned left, picked up her skirts and ran toward the mage’s hall.

The last thing Aveija remembered was the face of a beautiful creature coming toward him, covered in moonlight on the deck of a ship. She was more beautiful than any living being he had ever laid eyes upon, and as she approached him, she licked her blood red lips, wetting

them in anticipation of a kiss. He heard her song, a melody that almost lulled him into a trance, but then there was only smoke and a hazy darkness and a sudden feeling of falling... then somehow he was here, within the bedroom of his mage, wrapped in her sheets, tangled in one of the many mage-cloaks that covered her bed.

It came to him then in a rush: the stolen ship, a liaison, his one true love... Phaedre! He could smell her here, the light scent of her perfume, the fragrance of her hair. He pulled her cloaks around him and filled his lungs with her, then fell back into her bed and summoned her to him with The Pulse... but something was wrong... He sat up, pressed his wrists together once more and felt... fire? Regret? An unfamiliar feeling swept into him... sorrow. He cried out into the darkened room as sorrow overtook him in waves. He knew that Phaedre was gone. He threw himself from her bed and collapsed onto the cold floor, retching for breath, pushing the scent of her from his mind.

When the door to Phaedre's room slid open, Aji saw the shape of her son cowering beneath a window against a wall in the far corner. He was softly crying now, and when Destre entered the room carrying a fierspark, its light revealed a pearlescent cloak clutched in Aveija's hands, trailing out onto the floor around him.

Aji ran to him, dropped to her knees, and swept Aveija into an embrace.

"My son, you live."

Aveija whispered his reply through tears, "But *she* is gone."

Destre hung the fierspark and went to Phaedre's bed, where the mess of cloaks lay. Drops of fresh blood caught the light among them, and a trail of red stained the floor from the bed

to the hem of the cloak where Aveija sat. Destre lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, running his hands across the cloaks, somehow seeing for himself the mystery of what Phaedre had done. He addressed Aveija, "My Prince, Blood and Water have saved you this night."

Aji looked up, alarmed, taking her son's face in her hands. "You are wounded?"

Aveija wiped away his tears, and noticed the trail of blood leading back to the bed.

"I am mother, but sadly this blood is not mine."

Destre rose from the bed and stood over the mother and her son. He gestured to the cloak, "May I?"

Aveija lifted a handful of the cloak up to him, and when Destre raised it off the ground, holding it up to the light of the spark and away from the Prince, blood dripped freely from the within the hem of it, splashing down onto the floor.

"It bleeds from its edges, like an open wound, like the remains of something dismembered." Destre held the cloak away from him and red droplets splashed onto the outstretched hands of the Queen.

Aji reached out in an effort to grab hold of the fabric and staunch the flow, but as her hands touched the garment, they disappeared into it as though the cloak was made of milk.

"Mother," Aveija cried out, pulling himself up from the floor. "Your hands!"

Aji jerked her hands back toward her breast. They reappeared from within the cloak, but they had been burnt somehow, the skin now blistered and smouldered from some fire

beyond. The Queen held them steady as Destre and her son looked on horrified. “What is this new magic?” She said wide eyed.

2. The Moment Of Truth

I examined my face in the bathroom mirror; the light was better in here than in my bedroom. I looked old, okay maybe not that old, but far too tired for someone still in her early twenties. I gathered my mousy shoulder-length hair and pulled it up, away from my face and into a high ponytail. Pulled tight, it gave me a sort-of instant face-lift – nice work. I pulled a rubber band over it first to hold it all, then tied a pretty blue ribbon around it, making a bow and everything. I do have good thick hair, so there's that.

Having never been one for make up, I simply brushed my lips with gloss, made sure my teeth were clean by doing a once-over with my tongue, and bam, I was good to go.

Before I left my little one bedroom apartment, I did the usual check: gas off, lights off (except my bedside lamp, which was always on), toilet flushed (check – and a spritz of blue bowl cleaner!). I prided myself on keeping a nice clean house, not just for Miss S. but also for 'Miss Capital M E'. I grabbed my handbag, my keys and my phone (even though there's no service at work) and opened the door into the windowless fluorescent-lit hallway outside. No denying it, the smell was getting worse out here, but hell no, it was not my job to maintain the carpets in my own building as well as clean the millions (an exaggeration) of rugs at Miss S.'s. Let the body corporate deal with whatever had been traipsed into the cheap beige (everything must be beige!) carpet here at home.

Truly Miss S. could have started a carpet shop, although her rugs were definitely the real deal, not imitation 'Persian' things, and they were beautiful even if some of the patterns were kind of ugly. I still recall the way she lead me through her vast home all those months ago, room after room of rugs and wall hangings – tapestries I guess. I asked her then if she

or her husband had been in the rug business, and she stopped, turned to me and smiled, as though she was considering letting me in on some wicked secret.

“My husband?” she said amused, “I don’t have one of those. Nope, never have.” She turned and took off at a pace, hopscotching delicately across the giant rug on the floor.

It’s true, you don’t often see an old lady hopscotch her way anywhere, but I would come to learn – and love the fact – that Miss S. was not like any other old lady I had ever encountered.

By the time I arrived at work – the glorious country house of the enigmatic Miss S. – it had started to rain. I pulled my car into the carport beside the back entry – the staff door – decided against an umbrella, left my useless phone in the glove box, and made a run for it, clicking my car keys as I ran.

The kitchen inside was warm, and a fragrant casserole was bubbling away in the oven. Keeah, Miss S.’s long-time caregiver and cook had obviously been in a spicy mood this morning.

“Keeah?” I called, going to the butler’s pantry and finding myself an apron. There was no reply, perhaps she was upstairs or had already left for the day – she did come and go almost as she pleased. I pulled the apron strings around my waist, tying them efficiently behind my back. “Miss S.?”

I left the kitchen and walked down the long service hall, quietly knocked on the closed door to the front living room, opened it and entered.

The drapes had been closed and the lights were not switched on, however there was a glowing fire crackling in the grate of the huge fireplace. The walls heaved with heavy framed old photographs and paintings (why does this woman not open her own museum?), and on the wall to the left, the floor-to-ceiling shelves full of glass vases and pretty bottles sparkled in the amber firelight. This was the kind of elegant room I could easily see myself curling up with a good book in, warming myself in front of the fire, devouring a mug of hot chocolate.

“Natalie?” Miss S.’s chair swivelled around toward me, away from the fire, “I didn’t hear you arrive!” There she sat, cosy with a mohair throw pulled over her lap, her long silver hair gathered over one shoulder.

“Oh I’m sorry Miss S. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.” I stayed half in and out of the door, between worlds – the cool bright hallway and the dim, glowing living room.

Miss S. lifted a hand and wiped at her eye, like she was wiping away a tear, then beckoned me to come in and close the door – to trap the heat.

“I called out from the kitchen,” I said, stepping into the room, pulling the door closed behind me. “I assume Keeah’s finished for the morning. Lunch smells delicious, well, spicy.”

“I’m not hungry.” Miss S chuffed, swivelling her chair back to face the fire again.

“You will be.” I reminded her. “Would you like me to start on the front room upstairs? There’s a few old rugs that could use a scrub. I can leave you in peace for an hour or two.”

“No, that wouldn’t do. I’m glad of the company.”

Miss S. sounded sad, or pre-occupied. In the time I'd known her, she could often be quite melancholic. Some days she barely said a word to me, but I didn't mind, I had plenty of work to do. "Miss S?" I asked, putting on my best soothing voice, hoping she was alright. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Would you come over here, perhaps braid my hair?"

"Of course." I crossed the room and perched carefully on the arm of her chair, taking her long hair in my hands and running my fingers through it. Sometimes I was the cleaner and sometimes, I guess I was sort-of a counsellor. Miss S. was sad today, and whenever I was sad, having someone play with my hair always felt comforting.

"I am old." She said, after a short moment of silence.

"No kidding." I said casually gathering her long silver hair.

"I'm trying to remember everything but it's getting very difficult. A reminder that I'm far too old."

"Well, if it helps I'm tired." I replied with a smile.

"Nonsense, you are too young to be tired." She chided.

"It's my own fault. I get invited out for drinks and I say yes, even though it's a weeknight and I have work in the morning. But hey, YOLO."

Miss S. looked at me confused, so I explained the term to her with a laugh: 'you only live once'.

“Sometimes I think I have lived too long.” Miss S. sighed. I stopped braiding for a moment, hoping she would say something more... but she simply stared into the fire.

“It makes me happy thinking about what’s ahead,” I responded, finishing her hair messily.

“I want to travel one day.”

“You do. Of course you do.”

“It’s claustrophobic after a while; the city. It’s actually nice getting out of it, coming out here twice a week.” I looked around the beautiful room once more. The chandelier above us sprinkled diamonds of firelight all over the ceiling and onto the walls, “You should be happy, you have a great life, this house is gorgeous.”

“This house is just a house...” Miss S. said factually, taking my hands in hers. She didn’t look at me, but kept her eyes fixed on the fire, and then she whispered, “Do you want it?”

I actually laughed a little at the thought of it, me rattling round in here, “Miss S. what is it, you’re acting a little strangely?” and I thought to myself, ‘she can’t be serious, no one gives their house to their cleaner’.

“Please,” Miss S. took her eyes away from the fire and looked up at me, “No more ‘Miss S’. Please call me Saskia.”

“Saskia. Okay.” I said. Of course I knew her name, but as informal as we were, I preferred the distance of ‘Miss S.’

“We should be friends, you and I.” Saskia released my hands and moved hers onto her braid. “Friends confide in one another. There’s something you should know, something I want you to know about me and about this house... before I leave it for good.”

This was the first I heard that she was planning on leaving, that my job was obviously in jeopardy.

“But my job?” I asked, perhaps whining a little...

“Oh there’s a job for you, don’t worry about that. There’ll always be a place for you here with or without me.” Saskia pulled the throw from her lap and slowly made to stand up. I got up myself, to lend her a hand, but she flicked my gesture away.

“As I said before, I am old. My head is full of stories, too many of them, I’m about to explode.” She gestured to the wall of vases and bottles, “How many bottles are up on that wall? If you tell me, the house is yours.”

She shuffled across the rug toward the shelves as I tried to count the bottles quickly in the fire-lit room.

“Um...?” I honestly didn’t know. This wall was the one thing in the whole house Miss S. – sorry, Saskia – didn’t let me touch. I had always admired them, the decanters with their jewelled stoppers and coloured liquids, but I was a good cleaner, and an obedient one.

Saskia reached up and took a tiny crystal vase from one of the shelves.

“Many people in this world lead such *little* lives,” she said, unstopping the bottle in her hands. “What if I told you that life is truly much bigger and more thrilling than you ever imagined?”

“I’d tell you I have a big imagination.”

“You’re going to need it.” Saskia said, tipping the bottle gently so that its ruby red contents slipped cautiously toward the lip of the glass. One single red droplet glistened as it caught the firelight, then fell into her outstretched palm below. She closed her hand to trap the tiny drop, then she reset the stopper into the bottle and arranged it back into its place on the shelf.

“Just a single drop... so insignificant.” She said as she turned back to face me and the fireplace, holding her cupped hand close to her chest, her eyes flashing wildly in the glow of the fire.

“I was a child once,” she said, carefully lowering herself to the ground. “I remember that much.”

I stepped forward to offer my hand, but Saskia gestured for me to stay put. “I’ll bet your knees didn’t crack like this then?” I joked warmly.

“I was indeed far younger than you are now, and I wished so many times... to *escape*.”

As she said the word ‘escape’, Saskia turned her cupped hand over and placed her outstretched palm onto the rug beneath her.

It all happened instantly: the carpet became a fountain of thread-like vines, shooting up and wrapping themselves around Saskia’s entire body. In a matter of seconds, a cocoon made of woven threads had formed around her, then as quickly as it had appeared, the cocoon separated, the shape of the old woman fell away into the floor and the threads wove themselves back into the rug. Saskia had disappeared.