

Aria Veil

THE SKY DWELLER
and the Search for Whiloms

◆ **Book One** ◆

A Young Adult Fantasy

The world
It's filled with noise
Restless
That's how I feel
A voice drowned
In a sea of endless noise

A cut
A rift
A hole
It's there
Silence is there

It beckons to be heard
The silence of one's heart
If you know how to listen to it
Then you might just find the answer

Very few carry that power
A voice so unique and true
That there will be, in that sea –
One original thinker

When all is said and done
You remain
Limitless
Still
Unmoved
Until
The time comes

When you've passed through –
The crashing shallow stream
You find your center,
In the quiet waters of the deep

And there, at the core
Is you
A ripple
A voice
That can silence and break through
All the noise of the world

CHAPTER ONE

- Elle -

There was a faint hiss coming from outside. Elle listened closely to the tapping sound the tree branches made as they hit the windowpane.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Yo! Elle,” Paige said. “I’m so psyched about camp. It’s going to be one epic field trip!”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“What?” Elle replied without taking her eyes off the tree.

“Oh man! Is it just me or does it reek in here?” Paige said. “I think it’s coming from Tom’s backpack.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It lingered. The hissing sound was still there. Elle’s fingers hurt from squeezing her pencil tight.

“I should just close the window. It might be coming from outside.”

She was about to clasp the handles when she noticed a red smudge on the windowsill. *It looks a lot like blood...or maybe it's—*

Paige shrieked in horror. “What’s wrong with him?”

Elle turned abruptly and dashed forward between her other classmates. She saw Tom on the floor—his body convulsing.

“I’m going to call for help,” Paige said as she ran out of the room.

Where is their teacher? Maybe they should just take him to the clinic themselves before things get worse. Elle found it hard to just stand there and watch someone’s body writhe violently. Tom’s eyes rolled back and his mouth started to froth. Elle leaned in and was about to help lift him up but right in front of her, as he continued having a seizure, his face and skin started to change. Everything normal about the boy was gradually turning into something scary—rough scaled skin, sinister red eyes, flaring nostrils, sharp yellowish teeth, and a wide jaw that could break a leg in two. Elle couldn’t believe what she was seeing. He—*it* leaped on top of a desk and started to attack. It was lashing its claws and snapping its teeth, making her classmates scramble out

the door. Elle wanted to flee—but couldn't. All she could do was watch and feel trapped in a body that didn't feel like hers.

The creature went down on all fours and the ground trembled as it came and loomed over her. Elle wanted to call for help but it was impossible. She couldn't move—couldn't even close her eyes. The monster was so close she could feel its hot breath prickling her skin. Elle watched, frozen, as it opened its jaw and slowly dug its teeth deep into her flesh.

Tap. Tap. Tap. *Hiss.*

Elle jerked out of bed, screaming her lungs out. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She could feel cold sweat dripping down her forehead. *Okay Elle, you better snap out of this loop. It's just a dream. They are NOT real. There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing.* She has been having awful dreams for a long time now but lately they had become increasingly frequent and way more intense. She couldn't shake off the feeling of being attacked. It felt so real, and there was that mysterious sound that she heard. That hiss. Could her dreams mean anything?

Elle reminded herself that she should tell Paige about her dream as she grabbed a thick journal on her bedside table and pressed it against her chest. Holding it close comforted her—like a security blanket that protected her against her nightmares. She had only planned on browsing Grandpa’s journal, but now she couldn’t seem to part ways with it. Still, it should be back on his desk come daybreak. Elle thought of herself as some sort of detective who just wanted to know more about her departed grandmother. She was that missing apple in their family tree. Not only did her family refuse to talk about her, there wasn’t even a single picture of grandma in their family album.

Elle flipped through the first few pages of the journal. She wasn’t able to get any lead because the journal was impossible to read. Grandpa was a clever old man. He had written on it using a different language. The only thing readable was the phrase *Find the Whiloms* scribbled on the first page. What were these *whiloms* exactly? And why was her grandfather looking for them?

As she continued to flip the pages, she noticed that one of them was thicker than the rest. It was a folded page. Strange, she thought that she hadn’t noticed that before. Curious, she unfolded

it. Elle's mouth ran dry. In front of her was a sketch of the monster that had been plaguing her dreams.

She quickly folded the page back and slammed the journal shut. *How is that possible? I should ask Grandpa about this, but who am I kidding? I'm not even supposed to be snooping into the journal in the first place. I might just get reprimanded and never get a real answer.*

Elle got up from bed and walked across the room passing by the vanity. She paused when she saw herself in the mirror. She had tired eyes with dark rims underneath. She was one-hundred percent sure that her mom would be saying things like, *you better take better care of you skin. Ice cubes are helpful Elle or how about cucumber slices, dear?* She shook her head. Cucumber slices never really stayed on her eyes for long. They always seemed to slip off. She didn't give much thought about how she looked anyway—a far cry compared to her mother, Emilia, who always had to be glamorous, even as a retired superstar.

Yesterday, her mom had bought a box of brown-colored hair dye because she wanted to hide the most obvious eyesore in their family. Emilia never did like the fact that Elle was the only fourteen-year-old girl in Hillworth that had an odd bunch of silver

hair on top of her head. Elle wrinkled her nose. *Nope. I'm not going to have it colored.* In fact, it could even represent her spirit age. Maybe she was an old soul.

Elle pulled off the knitted cap and had to wince at the sight of the unicorn-designed coat stand that her mom had picked out for her. She wore the bonnet and took a quick glance at the pink wallpaper with dizzying twirly patterns, a plush asthma-inducing carpet, and a chandelier that hung so low from the ceiling that she'd frequently bump her head on it. She sighed before hopping out of her room through the open window. She half-expected to see blood on the windowsill, but there was none.

Elle quietly slipped out and grabbed hold of the water tank ladder in front of her. It felt cold under her touch. Once both her hands and feet were firmly onto the steel ladder, she stealthily climbed to the rooftop. Her adrenaline was pumping as she walked over and sat comfortably along the gabled edge of their house.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Elle loved how the wind felt against her skin. The first few times she came up here, she would raise her arms outward and imagine that she was flying. The rooftop was her spot—it was the one place where she

could hear herself think and divert her attention from those monsters.

Elle hummed a song that she and her grandpa liked as she looked up at the clear night sky. It was a good thing that their chateau was in the Eastern Sierra, far away from the city's light pollution. From here, she could see the stars clearly. Her lips curved into a small smile. The Milky Way often reminded her of how infinitesimally small she was and the universe was so much bigger. Bigger than herself. Bigger than her nightmares.

Elle pulled her cap closer to cover her ears. There was something in the air. For some reason, tonight felt different. Just then, she saw a pair of headlights slowly approach—its rays slicing through the stillness of the desert night. When the car stopped in front of their house, its headlights dimmed. From the car, three men appeared.

Elle immediately recognized her grandfather but had to squint to get a better look at the other two. Both men removed their hats as they walked toward the front door. She recognized the younger one—it was the green-eyed boy from her school, Mike. People didn't know much about him except that he was handsome, quiet, and smart. No one in school had the guts to even

ask why he, the headmaster's son, would transfer to Hillworth High so late. It was only last year when he entered the halls of their school.

Elle shifted her gaze to the other man. It was Ben Gabriel, Mike's father and the school's headmaster. Most of the students called him *Big Ben* because he looked as tall as a giant. An exaggeration, of course, but the headmaster really towered over almost everyone in school. Big Ben actually reminded Elle of the wooden owl figurine on the balustrade that led to the front porch. His owl-like features were uncanny. He had feathery gray hair and thick round eyeglasses that made his eyes look bigger than normal. His facial features were rather pointy and calculated.

Big Ben and her grandpa were talking to each other as they sat on wooden benches on the porch. Elle leaned in closer to listen, wondering what they could possibly be talking about.

"I don't even know how I'm going to tell her," she heard her grandfather say. "I wanted her outside the gates so she could experience growing up without the burden of it all."

Big Ben made a sound much like an agreement. "My boy will do his best to help. As for me, I feel that my time is near."

She couldn't see them, but she could still see Mike. He didn't seem to be paying attention to their conversation and was peering at the woods that embraced the house.

"Same," her grandfather said. "We will not go silently my friend. However—" Mike spotted Elle. He was grinning.

Elle scrambled to her feet, but she moved too quickly and lost her footing.

Time seemed to slow down. Elle watched her foot slip, making her lose her balance. She tried to hold onto something—anything that would steady her—but there was nothing but air. There was nothing else she could do but close her eyes, brace for the fall, and hope she wouldn't break too many bones.

Elle waited to feel the cobblestones on her back, but she didn't. She opened her eyes and saw that she was in Mike's arms.

"You alright?" he asked.

Her face burned red with embarrassment, "Yes. I'm very sorry. I know I shouldn't have been on the roof."

Mike lowered her down gently.

Elle got to her feet and tried to straighten out her shirt and calm her breathing. "Good evening, grandpa, Headmaster Ben."

Elle felt flushed. She sneaked a peak at her grandfather. Her eyes widened when she saw him clutching his chest, his face contorted in pain.

“Grandpa, are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine, dear,” he replied. He tried to sit on the bench behind him, but his knees gave way.

“Grandpa!” Elle cried out, rushing to catch her grandfather, but Big Ben got to him first and helped him sit down.

“No, you’re not. You’re having a heart attack,” he said.
“Mike.”

Mike quickly stepped forward and put her grandfather’s arm on his shoulder. Elle’s heart clenched as she watched Mike take him to the car. She could hear him groaning in pain. She should go with him. She had to.

“Elle, listen,” Big Ben said. His voice seemed so distant. “Uriel, look at me, dear.” This time, he stressed her first name. “Go and tell your parents. We’ll meet them at the hospital.”

Elle’s eyes were still on her grandpa as she nodded to him.
This is all my fault.

As Big Ben turned and rushed to the car, she dashed to her parent’s bedroom and knocked urgently on their door.