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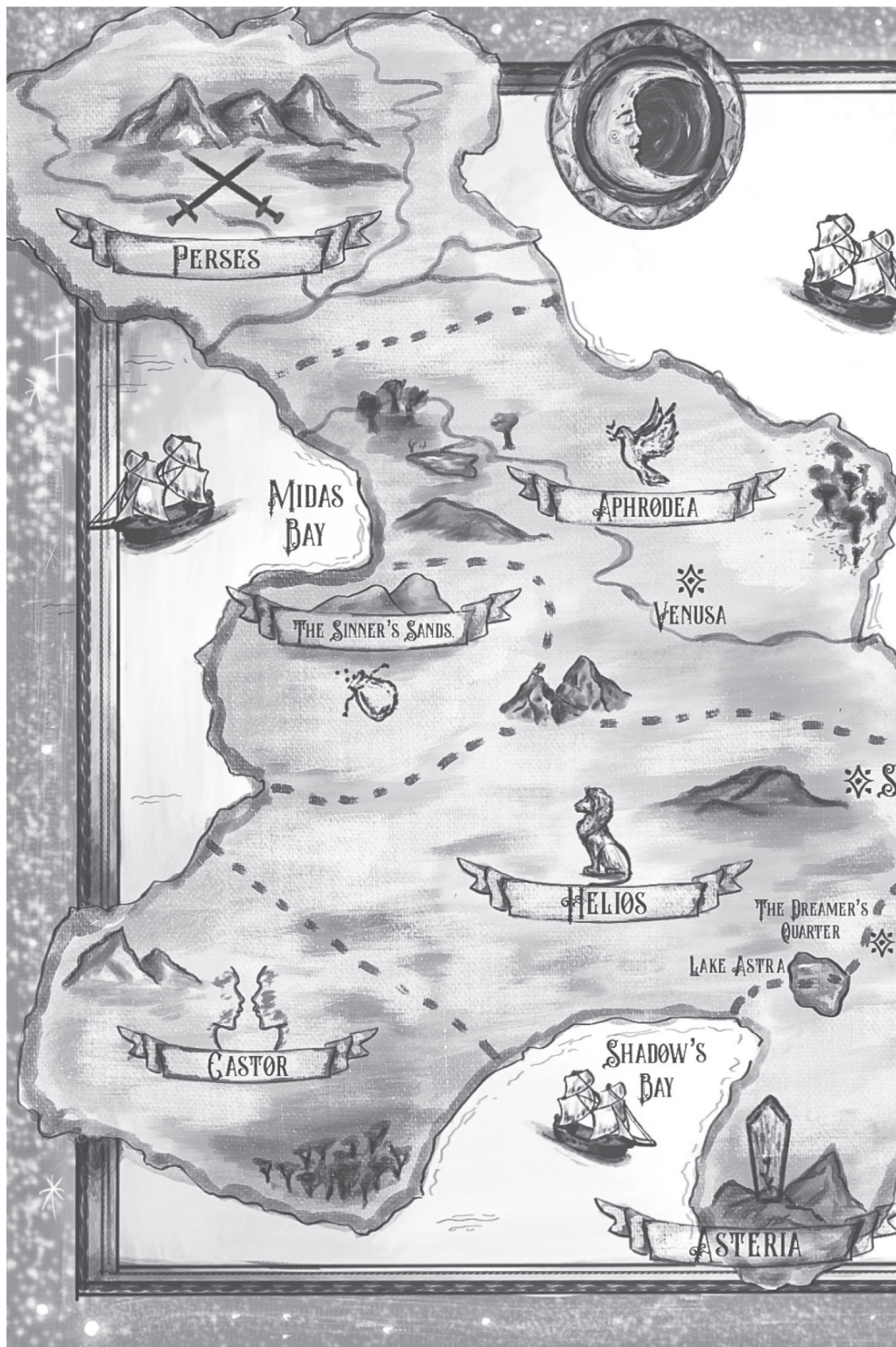
FALLEN STARS

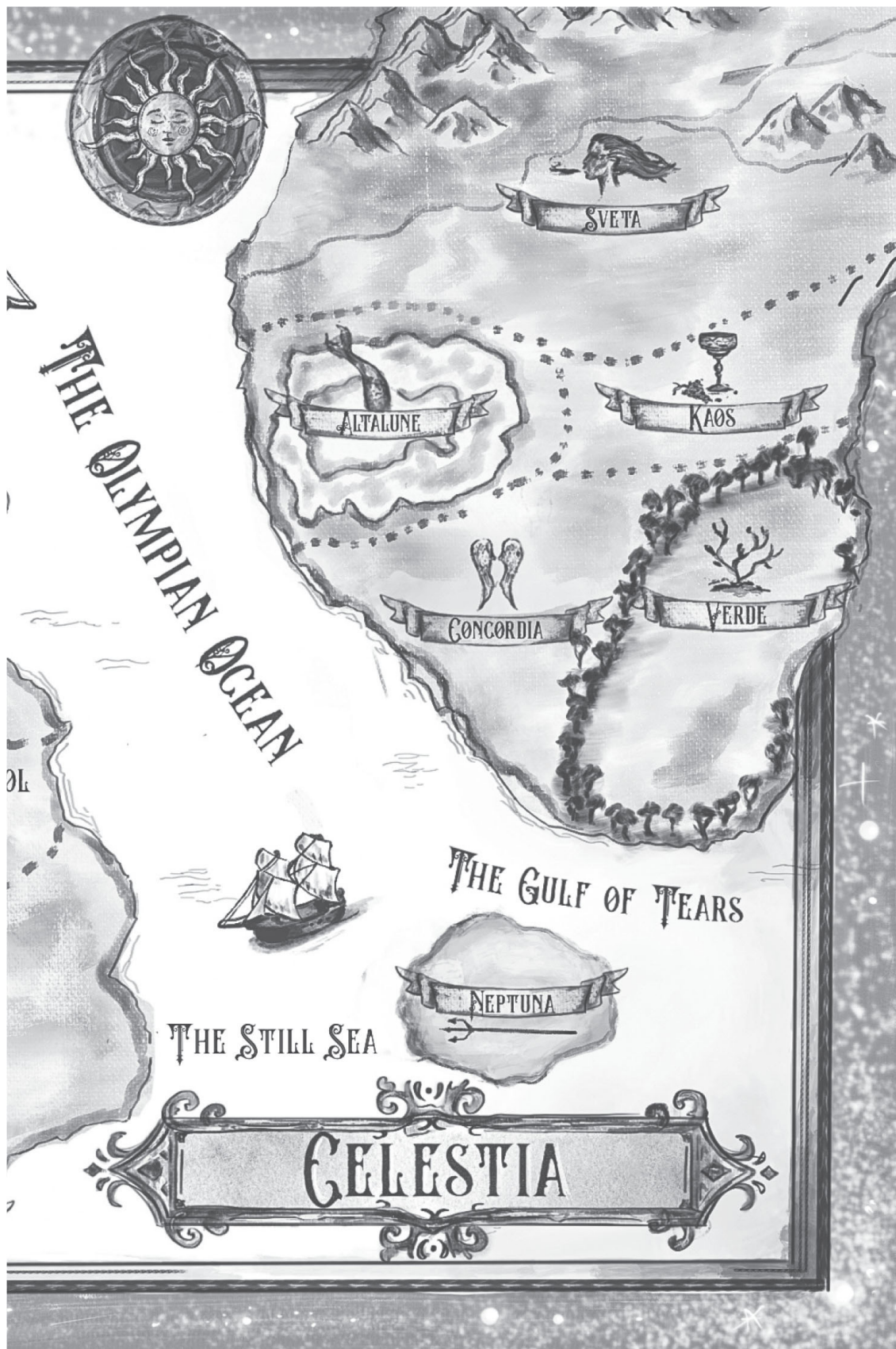
Never make a
bargain with a god



IMANI ERRIU







FALLEN STARS

IMANI ERRIU



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[*Acknowledgements*](#)

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*For Mama and Papa,
Thank you for raising me on fairy tales,
and believing that I could write my own one day*



THE STARS

Ariete (Ah-ree-ett) – Patron Star of **Perses**.

The King of Stars. God of wrath, war and blood.

Also known as '*the Tyrant*'.

Torra (Tor-a) – Patron Star of **Aphrodea**.

Goddess of lust and pleasure.

Also known as '*the Seductress*'.

Gem and Eli (Jem and Ee-lie) – Patron Stars of **Castor**.

Goddess of spite and trickery; god of riddles, cunning and knowledge.

Also known as '*the Trickster*' and '*the Silvertongue*'.

Cancia (Can-see-a) – Patron Star of **Altalune**.

Goddess of pain, sadness, rivers and lakes.

Also known as '*the Weeping Goddess*'.

Leyon (Ley-on) – Patron Star of **Helios**.

God of pride, arts, prophecy and the Light.

Also known as '*the revered Lord Light*'.

Verra (Veh-ra) – Patron Star of **Verde**.

Goddess of earth and decay.

Also known as '*the Virgin*'.

Lias (Lie-as) – Patron Star of **Concordia**.

God of love, justice and lies.

Also known as '*the Beautiful Liar*'.

***Scorpius* (Scorp-ee-us)** – Patron Star of **Neptuna**.

God of envy, oceans and poisons.

Also known as '*the Merciless One*'.

***Sagittion* (Saj-i-ton)** – Patron Star of **Kaos**.

God of wine, madness and ecstasy.

Also known as '*the Reveller*'.

***Capri* (Cap-ree)** – Patron Star of **The Sinner's Sands**.

God of greed, money and success.

Also known as '*the Merchant*'.

***Aquaria* (Ah-quer-ee-a)** – Patron Star of **Sveta**.

Goddess of misfortune, air and ice.

Also known as '*our Unblessed Lady*'.

***Piscea* (Pie-see-a)** – Patron Star of **Asteria**.

Goddess of fate, fear and the Dark.

Also known as '*the Slumbering Goddess*'.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fallen Stars was first published indie in 2023. In this now traditionally published version you may notice some changes, including scenes and characters from the previous version that are no longer in the book. The traditionally published books follow the canon of events that will continue to unfold in the rest of the series, so I recommend following these books rather than the indie versions. And rest assured—for any of my older readers, all your favourite scenes and characters will be back later in the series.

PART ONE

PROLOGUE

Blood dripped from Enzo's side, which he clutched as he staggered on, head whipping back periodically to check behind him. The Dreamlands were a cruel and cursed place. His surroundings shifted violently—one moment they were a skeletal forest with twisting branches snapping at his clothes, the next a desert more arid and unforgiving than the Sinner's Sands, where his own sun above him beat on, blaring and red.

He was parched.

Starved.

Yet nothing could sate him.

He could not rest.

He stumbled forwards, the landscape changing once again, the sun extinguished, sweet shadow and greenery wrapping around him.

He pressed his burnt face to cool, dew-dropped grass, giving a rasp of relief.

'There has to be a way out,' he panted. 'There has to be a way back.'

'And just what are you willing to pay for it?'

Enzo stilled. No magick worked in the Dreamlands save Elara's, so his fists clenched uselessly by his sides. He raised his head slowly to see rows of crooked tombstones, like a jagged, yawning maw. A temple made of obsidian glittered ahead. And before him stood a figure swathed in black robes. Its voice was terrible, rattling—like a dying breath.

'What is your price?' Enzo rasped.

The darkness smiled.

CHAPTER ONE

Elara yanked her dagger out of the face before her, watching in satisfaction as her blade slashed it to ruins.

There was a low whistle behind her as Leo approached through the shadows, folding his arms.

‘Getting a little bloodthirsty, Bellereve.’

Elara turned, holding up the ravaged piece of parchment. ‘Wouldn’t you be offended too? I’m much prettier in real life.’ She tried to force a smirk on to her face, though her fury was now a writhing, living thing within her, a beast that was fed every day.

Leo scoffed as he took it from her, reading out loud: ‘WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE—PRINCESS ELARA BELLEREVE OF ASTERIA.’

‘Queen,’ Elara corrected, sheathing her dagger as she began to stalk down the rain-slicked cobblestones.

‘WANTED CRIMINAL. GUILTY OF COMMITTING *STARSIN*. FLEEING THE WRATH OF *DIVINITAS*. STARKILLER.’

‘At least that part’s true,’ Elara muttered, eyes flitting over every figure that passed them, looking for a particular face in each one. She caught herself in the reflection of a shop window: skin wan, eyes dark, and black lace gown trailing in puddles as though she was dressed for a funeral. She pulled the hood of her cloak further over her.

‘Possessing a dangerous and blasphemous power that killed our Lady Gem,’ Leo continued, matching her pace. He looked handsome as ever, dressed in the Castorian high fashion of a long coat, ruffed shirt and britches, a far cry from the Helion general she’d left the Kingdom of Light with. ‘Approach with caution and notify your nearest city guard of any sighting of her. Reward for her capture, dead or alive—10,000 midans. BY ORDER OF THE STARS.’

Elara made a disgusted noise as she snatched it back, crumpling it up before she tossed it into a puddle. ‘They couldn’t even stretch to twenty?’ she said as they stopped before a non descript slate-grey door.

‘Perhaps that’s why Eli didn’t answer your call.’

‘Perhaps,’ she muttered, leaning against the wall and trying to tamp down the flash of hurt.

She had tried, days before, to call upon him when they had exhausted every other option. Healers had come from far and wide—the best in Celestia. From the botanical healers of Verde to the songsoothers of Altalune, Elara had begged and threatened them all as her soulmate had lain prone upon his bed. To no avail.

When the last had shaken his head and offered his condolences, Elara had rushed out of the palace to Isra’s and taken her Stella deck before the seer could even protest.

She’d spilled her blood upon Eli’s card, a serpent with grey eyes, its jaw hanging open. Had waited, as the Helion sky bled over the card with her. Surely, he would appear—the god who had aided their cause before, who was potentially the only person who possessed the knowledge on how to wake Enzo. She’d waited all night, praying to the god, and he had not come.

So now, she was in Castor, hunting down the Star herself. And it seemed the Stars were hunting her, too.

A lamplighter neared them, his long stick raised to the sky as it lit the candles within the glass lanterns.

When Elara had turned the sky black in her fury, her shadows swathing it, she hadn’t realized that the impenetrable darkness would last as long as it had. She was not actively using her magick to keep night over the world, and yet day still hadn’t dawned.

To their credit, the citizens of Castor had adapted to the lack of light quickly.

She saw other lamplighters further down the row, stretching their lit sticks to the inky sky.

Food and warmth didn't seem to be much of an issue, either—restaurants and pubs were still open and bustling thanks to the Verdans and Helions, who likely would make a fortune off Elara's actions.

Not that she regretted them. She had made a promise. She would turn the world to darkness if Enzo was taken from her.

And she vowed Celestia would never see light again unless it was Enzo's.

'Come on, Merissa,' Leo muttered.

'Patience is a virtue,' Merissa said lightly as the door swung open—as though on cue—tucking her honey curls beneath a hooded cloak. She gave Elara a wide smile, jade eyes bright, and Elara tried to force one in turn. But she couldn't quite separate the girl before her from the demi-Star who had shoved a blade through her back.

They'd spent an uncomfortable night in the ramshackle inn Merissa had just appeared from, Merissa making small talk in the bed they'd shared while Elara barely spoke. She stretched her neck; gods, she'd slept badly, too. It had barely felt like rest at all.

'It's already late,' Elara said, beginning to walk. Leo passed her a peach, and she took it, her grimace softening a little. 'Thanks.'

'They taste like shit,' he professed through a mouthful as he made a face. 'Nothing like Ma's.'

'Have you heard any word from the palace?' Elara asked softly. Leo had headed to the Raven's Post while she'd gone to a mapmaker's, determined to find Eli's temple as swiftly as possible.

Leo nodded. 'Isra sends her love. All is as we left it. My men guard Enzo round the clock, and Isra is helping the council in your stead. She says the progress they've already made with the Asterian council is miraculous.'

Elara nodded, though the weight on her chest did not ease. She thought of both her and Enzo's kingdoms, the disarray they were in with no rulers. She trusted no one but those closest to her; she knew how councils worked. Coups were far too frequent within the history books. She only prayed that whenever she returned to Asteria, there'd still be a council and kingdom to rule.

‘Up here,’ she said, jerking her head to the narrowing alley ahead, and pushed the worries away. Right now, only Enzo mattered.

The sound of a bell pierced the air as Leo went to speak. ‘Hear ye, hear ye!’ shouted a town crier, waving his bell to and fro. ‘Murder on Remus Street! Body vanished in the dead of night!’

‘We need to be careful,’ Leo said quietly once the man had passed. ‘Who knows how many spies the Stars now have on the streets?’

‘Maybe you should ask the daughter of one and see if she knows,’ Elara said, failing to keep the bite out of her voice.

Something like hurt flashed across Merissa’s face, but Elara had no time for it. Torra, Eli, Merissa. As good as they’d claimed to be, they’d all known the kind of fate that would befall Elara but had not cared to share it. And Elara had paid for it. As always.

‘I haven’t spoken to my mother since that night in the throne room,’ Merissa said a little coldly.

Elara ignored her, rolling her shoulders as though she could still feel the blade Merissa had pushed between them, and scanned the signs of the bookshops they passed. Janus and Sons, Hermes Booksellers, Ink and Scribe. The names meant nothing to her.

Finally, the small, haphazard streets opened up on to a huge market square with a towering temple in its centre. Slate and smoky quartz made up the pillared structure, which had a giant stone serpent wound around each column. Lit sconces lined the entrance, making it almost inviting.

The anger inside her, which had been tamped down by her need to focus, now reared again as she looked upon the place of worship for the gods who had done nothing to help her, nothing to help Enzo.

She cut through the milling crowds and the few lazily erected market stalls. She felt Leo and Merissa behind her but didn’t stop, only sinking further into the hood of her cloak as she cut a line straight to the temple steps. To her satisfaction, she saw some worshippers kneeling before one snake—the white one—weeping. Good. She hoped killing Gem had left a mark on the world, rid it of at least one worthless god. She said no prayers, made no sign of worship, as she entered.

CHAPTER TWO

The temple was filled with the faint smell of incense and the quiet murmurs of prayer. A few worshippers knelt on pews of smoked quartz, looking ahead to a statue of Eli. Others left tokens upon an empty plinth beside him, one that Elara assumed must have been Gem's.

She scanned the pews of devotees until she saw a priest tending to the candles.

With a twitch of a hand and barely a thought, she blended into the shadows of the temple, wrapping them around herself as she stalked through the hall. Now utterly untethered, since she had accepted her own shadow-self, they seemed to bend to her will. Her sight darkened for a moment, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Strange. The same thing had happened the day before when she'd reached for her magick. Could it be a side effect of the depth and power now awakened within her? She'd have to explore that when there weren't more pressing matters to attend to.

She appeared before the priest like a wraith, and he let out a faint cry before Elara cast an illusion upon the room, hiding the priest along with herself from the congregation.

'Where is Eli?' she demanded, gathering his robes between her fists. He had a weaselly, sly face, his skin pale and eyes a typical Castorian blue.

He peered into her hood. 'You,' he said in horror. 'I-it's you. Starkiller! Star—'

Elara hissed, her dagger already in her hand, and pressed it to his throat. 'One more word and I'll show you that I'm not prejudiced towards just Stars.'

The priest gulped, his breaths rapid.

'I'll ask you one more time: *where is your god?*'

She heard Leo and Merissa come up behind her, and she cast her net of illusion wider, snaring them within the sweet invisibility.

The priest's eyes flicked to somewhere behind her. 'You think I'll let you kill him the way you did my Lady Gem, Starkiller?' he hissed. 'I'll never tell you.'

'Ah-ah,' Leo tutted. 'Too late.'

He pointed his own knife to the left, where the priest's eyes had betrayed him, and Elara saw a fountain, the stone not quite matching the rest of the temple.

'He's not—'

'Did you worship her?' Elara interjected. 'Gem? Did you turn a blind eye to all that she did? To her own people, and others?'

The priest frowned, and the hand that held her blade began to tremble. That beast within her—silver and hungry—prowled back and forth. 'Do you know what she did to me? To the lost princess of Asteria?' Even now, Elara still woke up screaming some days, her mind fractured. The priest tried to answer, but she wasn't finished.

'And you worshipped a being like that? Protected her?' Elara clenched her jaw as that anger in the pit of her stomach ignited. Maybe it was her beloved's flame that she felt within her, that sparked her veins alight.

'She was my goddess,' the priest began to shout. 'I would follow her until—'

Elara slammed her knife into the priest's neck. The obsidian egg nestled in the hilt's centre showed a glimpse of her reflection—one that, for a second, she didn't recognize. She blinked as Leo cursed behind her. In her anger, she'd let her illusion drop, and gasps and screams rippled across the room as the devotees watched the priest fall. Some began to flee through the open doors while others advanced in either abject horror or anger. She heard weapons being drawn as someone began to scream for a guard.

The first worshipper neared, Leo already drawing his sword and pushing Merissa behind him.

'Starkiller!' the worshipper proclaimed, pointing a shaking finger at her. 'It's the Starkiller! Get the guards, it's Princess—'

Elara growled as she held both hands before her, black shadows spewing from her palms. People screamed in panic as the shadows ran off her, and, once more, her vision pitched. She gritted her teeth as she saw flashes of people before her, some running, others trying to attack, between the gaps in her vision. The shadows poured and poured from her until out stepped her dragon. It opened its maw and roared—a little sprinkle of her illusions within it—and the last stragglers hightailed it out of the space.

‘The doors!’ Elara ground out as her sight flitted in and out again.

‘Elara, your eyes,’ Merissa gasped.

Elara squeezed them shut, her shadow dragon launching forwards as it slammed the temple doors shut. Leo drew across the giant bolt and leaned against them, breathing heavily.

‘Stars, Bellereve. A little warning next time.’

‘If I’d let him live, he’d have gone to get the guards anyway,’ she retorted.

‘Which is exactly why Merissa should have glamourised you before we came in.’

‘There is time for that later. I *wanted* Eli to know who was here.’ Her eyes snapped to the fountain that the priest had given away. ‘Now hurry—we don’t have much time,’ she said.

Leo passed a hand over his face, following her across the temple, past the pews and rows of green wax candles that smelled of honey, to the fountain.

Another snake was wrapped around it, this time its thick coils forming part of the fountain, while its yawning, fanged maw was open, holding a bowl of starsblessed water.

Elara ran a finger over a fang, the scent of rainwater strong though the temple itself was dry.

She wet her lips as she pushed. Nothing happened.

The three of them perused the entire structure, looking for a secret lever or trapdoor. The priest had looked directly at it; that, Elara was sure of. And she could *feel* Eli’s magick coming from it, that quicksilver charm.

With Sofia's dagger, now slick with blood, she tried to lever up any of the lines within the stone, but with no luck. Leo took a run at it, hoping to knock it over and reveal an entrance beneath, but this served only for him to curse every Star in the sky as he rubbed his shoulder.

Merissa tried to sweet-talk it, to ask politely if it could take them to Eli.

Finally, losing patience—and precious time—Elara took her knife again, this time making a slash across her palm before clenching it over the serpent's open maw.

'If it works for a Stella deck, then maybe it works for this too,' she said.

Her blood slowly dripped into the serpent's mouth, clouding the blessed water pink.

They waited.

Just as Elara made to turn to Leo, to tell him it was futile, something moved.

When she looked back, to her disbelief, the serpent's mouth closed.

It began to slither in on itself, its head retreating as the snake began to uncoil, its body swirling and writhing until, in its place, a hollow in the ground was revealed. No, not a hollow—a staircase.

It stretched and spiralled down as far as the eye could see, glowing green from within, an ominous invitation.

Elara looked in bewilderment back to her friends. The scent of rain, and now tobacco, washed over her again as she felt Eli's charm slink through the room.

There was a rattle at the door to the temple. 'Guards! Open up! We know you're in there, Starkiller!'

Leo pushed Elara and Merissa down before ducking on to the staircase himself, and Elara looked up to see the snake slither into place above, trapping them in Eli's lair.