

THE LAST STARBORN SEER

VENETIA CONSTANTINE



An Aria Book

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*For all those with scarred hearts and bruised minds;
because invisible wounds cut deepest and
take longest to heal.*

*And especially for Alexander,
Rafaella, Atticus and Celestia.*

Thank you for loving me when I couldn't love myself.



A NOTE ON TIME

Arcelia has one sun and three moons. The moons' phases are synced, following similar patterns to our own lunar phases.

Sunring: Akin to our year. Comprising four hundred moonsrisings. Different words are used to denote this unit of time in each of Arcelia's four realms, such as tree-ring, scorching, spawning.

Moonsrising: Akin to our twenty-four-hour day.

Moonscycle: Akin to our month. Comprising forty moonsrisings.

Moonsquarter: Akin to our week. There are four moonsquarters in each moonscycle. A moonsquarter comprises ten moonsrisings.

Hours, minutes and seconds are used in Arcelia in much the same way as we use them.

A NOTE ON SEASONS

Arcelia is a two-season world; one of growth, one of decline. In Estelia these are called Thaw (akin to our Summer) and White (akin to our Winter).

The Sickening has disrupted seasonal rhythms across Arcelia.

A NOTE ON AGES

The history of Arcelia is divided into three ages.

Tarnished Age: The period following the Dawn Sister's creation of Arcelia and the subsequent invasion of the shadow creatures, lasting until the Elemagi came to power. A benighted age when the festering presence of the shadow creatures suppressed levels of Aether across the realms. A time when the Sistertouched were feared and subjugated.

Lustrous Age: The period following the Blood Bond, lasting until the Sickening was unleashed. A golden age of peace and stability when the Elemagi vanquished the shadow creatures and restored levels of Aether across the realms. A time when the Sistertouched were venerated and lauded.

Ruined Age: The period following the outbreak of the Sickening, continuing until the present day. A cursed age, with the cores of Aether across Arcelia being slowly corrupted by Shadow to catastrophic effect. A time when the Sistertouched are reviled and have almost been eradicated.

For a full glossary, please visit
www.venetiaconstantine.com

IMMORTALS OF NOTE

DEITIES

Dawn Sister

One of the twin primordial goddesses responsible for creating the Cradleworld and Void. Source and sacred vessel of the four Aethers and originator of Light Lore. Created Arcelia from the jewels in a troth ring gifted to her by Want, after being expelled from the Cradleworld by the Dusk Sister. Deceased, rent to pieces by a flock of night-birds.

Dusk Sister

One of the twin primordial goddesses responsible for creating the Cradleworld and Void. Source and sacred vessel of the four Aethers and originator of Shadow Lore. In a fit of jealous pique, she expelled the Dawn Sister from the Cradleworld by means of a cursed veil and later dispatched a host of shadow creatures to Arcelia to kill her twin.

Want

Also known as The Beloved. A helpmeet fashioned by the Dusk Sister and intended to keep her company in the Cradleworld. When Want fell in love with the Dawn Sister, the Dusk Sister flew into a jealous rage, expelling her twin from the Cradleworld, hoping to win Want for herself. After Want spurned her advances, the Dusk Sister dispatched a host of shadow creatures to Arcelia to kill the Dawn Sister.

A TAINTED LEGACY

The Sistertouched are recognised by the marks they bear: Star, Bough, Wave and Flame.

Across Arcelia's three ages, they've been called many names; raised as gods, reviled as monsters.

We know them now as the Branded.

None had been born to the North, not in living memory, and the old magic was believed destroyed. But then came a babe bearing the mark. Blessing or scourge?

The last of the Branded.

The last Starborn Seer.

From the introduction to the Book of Starlore
Ninth printing, 781 Sunrings Post-Sickening

IN THE BEGINNING

IN THE BEGINNING were the Sisters and their Cradleworld.

Mirror twins. Sacred vessels. They contained the might of the four primordial Aethers: the Stars, the Waves, the Boughs, the Flames. Identical in appearance, but in temperament as different as the Cradleworld's hours of Bright and Dim, the Sisters named themselves for the Dusk and Dawn.

The Dawn Sister practised Light Lore, using her body's energy to weave the Aethers. All magic has its price, but the Dawn Sister's magic was as temperate and balanced as she herself was, requiring only a fleeting tithe: chattering teeth for a warm breeze, wizened cheeks for a tree in bloom. But the Dusk Sister favoured Shadow Lore. She spun the Aethers using magic born of her blood and fed with her spirit. Powerful but volatile. Stronger magic came at a higher cost: chipping away at the Dusk Sister's very soul. And unlike the body, a soul – even a godly soul – cannot restore itself. The toll for using Shadow Lore was permanent, irrevocable.

Together, the Sisters tended their Cradleworld, one working while the other slept – the Dawn Sister responsible for the Bright hours, the Dusk Sister, the Dim. Together, they devised fantastical incantations and used them to embellish their shared world, recording each one in their Book of Mysteries.

And, for a time, they knew peace.

But the Dusk Sister's spirit sickened, twisted after casting so many Shadow spells. Discontent took root, consuming her like ivy does a crumbling wall.

One evening, as the Dawn Sister lay sleeping, the Dusk Sister used her magic to birth a companion to join her in the Cradleworld – a helpmate to ease the heaviness in her heart.

Born of Shadow, Want arrived in the shape of a man.

At first, he was a source of joy to both Sisters. They introduced him to their world, shared its secrets with him, taught him to care for its jewelled orchard, and the Dusk Sister's spirits lifted. But, as time wore on, she noticed Want slept more often in the Dim hours than the Bright. That he gravitated towards her twin.

And discontent flowered into jealousy.

She spun a veil of darkness, laced it with curses, stitched it with spite. Sacrificing another piece of her soul, splintering yet more shards of her heart and mind. And in the early hours, before the Dim gave way to the Bright, she swathed her sleeping twin in the mantle, hoping to shroud forever the Dawn Sister's beauty and win Want for herself.

When she awoke, the Dawn Sister tried to cast the veil aside, but her magic was no match for her twin's. She could not unpick the bloodspell which knitted it to her brow.

The force of her twin's resentment shocked the Dawn Sister, evidence of the damage Shadow Lore was inflicting, its gradual warping of her sister's mind. So, she worked in secret for a cure, devising various incantations in the hope one might purge her twin of Shadow and free them both from its corrosive legacy.

But one morning, as the Dawn Sister sat by the banks of the glistening stream that watered the Cradleworld's orchard, recording her latest attempt at a curative spell in the Book of Mysteries, Want presented her with a ring studded with the choicest of the jewels they'd harvested together. He told her she was more brilliant, more beautiful, than any of them, and asked her to be his. Again, he begged her to lift the veil so he might kiss her. And as Want slipped the troth ring onto her finger, bolstered by love's bright burn, the Dawn Sister summoned the fullness of her powers.

This time, she lifted the veil. She only managed a scant inch to bare her lips, but an inch was all it took.

As she leant towards her Beloved, as her lips touched his, the veil at last wrenched free, but the curses embedded within it sparked to life. The Dawn Sister was cast out from the Cradleworld, into a great Void.

In vain, she tried to return, but her sister's magic proved, once more, too strong.

In time, she gave up hope of ever seeing the Cradleworld or her Beloved again.

Deep in the Void, she crafted a new world from the jewels in her troth ring, naming it Arcelia, which means treasure. For she made it from the thing she treasured most.

A world of delicate harmony and perfect balance.

A haven the Dawn Sister believed safe from the horrors of Shadow Lore.

But even gods can be mistaken.

PART I

STAR-DAMNED





THE GIRL MADE INVISIBLE

LEILANI

Crystal Court, Meissa, Northern Realm of Estelia
Ruined Age: 800 Sunrings, 30 Moonrisings Post-Sickening

TEN MORE PACES to the palace gates.

Fighting the urge to check behind me, I draw the cowl of the grey cloak lower, inhaling my liegemaids' crisp scent of starch and soap. The bitter wind pierces the thin fabric, lashing my skin. In accordance with my father's laws, the mantle is cheaply made and lacks embellishment: drab, anonymous, perfect.

No one will look twice at me disguised in the garb of an indentured air-refugee. No one will shrink back or make the sign of the Star as I pass either. Not so long as I remember to keep my strange eyes lowered, my cursed hair and the marking on my wrist covered.

Eight paces.

Five.

One.

The gates. I've made it to the gates and no bells have sounded.

The steady clip of hooves on cobblestones echoes close by. I focus on the rhythmic sound, try to match my ragged breaths to it. I look over my shoulder, back at the palace. Tiers of iridescent starcrysal crowned by turrets, stacked like the frosted layers of my bridal cake. A beautiful cage, but a cage, nonetheless.

No sign of the King's Guard – my father's Watchers.

The clacking hooves falter. I whip my head back. A cart now blocks the entrance, loaded with trussed carcasses of bucks. Their charnel-sweet scent taints the air. They'll be carved up, turned into pies for the banquet celebrating my binding to Lord Astrophel next moonsquarter. A rare treat in these lean times. If I can only make it past the gates and over the bridge, if I can only thread my way through the city and breach the wall, that star-damned ceremony might never take place.

Two men dismount, heave a buck onto their shoulders with a shared groan. Its head lolls back, glassy eyes staring upwards. I twist away from them, tug my hood lower. Biting the inside of my cheek, I focus on keeping my breaths even, on ignoring the wild thuds of my heart. I adjust the weight of what I hope will pass as a laundry bundle, while the men stagger past me. While precious seconds are squandered.

I don't dare check behind me again.

The horse leading the cart paws the frosty ground, then edges forwards. A small gap opens up, large enough to slip through.

The palace is behind me. Now, to reach the city wall.

The setting sun gilds the rainbow waters of the Opaline River, but I don't pause to admire the view as I cross the Bridge of Stars. Not tonight. My gaze darts through the starcrystal spires spearing the sky, over the great domes of the Bindery and Observatory, winding between the loose knots of citizens scurrying home from work. No one idles in Meissa. People keep moving. Less chance of exposure that way.

I head for the market square. Once I've cut across that, Mother says it should only take ten minutes to reach the wall. I've never been allowed in the Northern Quarter, my movements restricted to a half-mile radius of the palace, and always accompanied by the Watchers. But I've studied enough maps. I'll find my way.

A prickling rises at the nape of my neck. The world dims.

No. Not now. Not again.

Light speckles the darkness, pinpricks stretching to a web of silver threads. I clutch the parapet in case my legs give way.

The tinkling whisper settles in my ears. *Arcelia stands on a knife-edge. Look to the mountain.*

That's the third such warning since dawnrise.

But these visions aren't to be trusted; they're possibilities only – a constellation of ifs – and sometimes dark mirrors signifying the opposite of what they first suggest. I focus on what's real. The cool, slick parapet beneath my hands, the crunch of permafrost beneath my boots. I stop my ears to the whisperings as best I can; shut my inner eye to the blurred images barrelling towards me; refuse to reach for the threads and allow those images to weave into something intelligible.

Still, I can't help but follow the instruction, even though it means confronting the source of the realm's magic – of my own star-cursed magic. Drawing my cloak closer, I search the northern horizon for the peak of the Astral Mountain. Thanks to the Sickening, I've never known its full radiance, just as I've never known anything but the faintest glimmer of my own silver skin, but I've never seen the halo this dim before either. Levels of Star-Aether must be running dangerously low.

The mountain is the heart of Estelia's magic, but it's scarcely beating anymore.

My vision is still mottled, but I can't afford to linger. The blindness will pass. It always does. I push against the parapet, yank my hood down, continue over the bridge.

My pulse stutters as I weave through Meissa's winding streets. The urge to run towards the wall is overwhelming. I could reach it in half the time if I sprinted. But I mustn't give in to temptation.

Rule number one: blend in, don't attract attention.

A rule I've spent my whole life trying, and failing, to obey.

Besides, if I get to the wall ahead of schedule, I'll miss my narrow window of escape. My only hope of getting past the patrols for illegal air-refugees is to arrive as the guard changes. I clench my fists and shorten my strides, falling into step with the people milling around me, careful to keep my eyes trained on the cobbles.

Arcelia stands on a knife-edge.

The warning echoes with every step I take. Despite my father's attempts at denial, perhaps the protective wards have finally worn thin, the full weight of the Sickening at long last bearing down upon us. I shudder. Stars forbid. But it would explain the mutterings of blight and rising cases of Flamefever beyond the city wall, of mounting tension among the Outrealmers, discontent that threatens the centuries-old Partition Treaties. It would explain too, the sharpened edge of accusation in the courtiers' stares on the rare occasions I'm allowed to walk among them.

They blame me for all of this, or my kind anyway.

I blink the last of the light-spots away, swerving to avoid an elderly man stooped under a bundle of kindling. It was bad enough being able to read people's auras, but these nightmarish visions are so much worse. Burdens of knowledge I never asked for. Orthriel, my Guardian cielsylph, says my magic is evolving because I'm coming of age, and while there are limits to Orthriel's knowledge of the ways of the Branded, I trust them on this. Just another reason I have to leave Meissa now, before my wretched powers grow any stronger.

For, what if this is the start? The start of my descent into Shadow...

Rounding a corner, I find myself in front of the Bindery. Its great doors, carved to resemble the open pages of a book, stand to my right. I pause as a cart carrying starfruit rattles past, trailing the crop's honeyed scent in its wake. More precious supplies for my binding feast.

The library is my favourite place in Meissa. Its books have offered me solace and companionship, opened gateways, allowed me to soar far beyond the city wall, though I've never once set foot outside it.

Yes, books have saved me before. Stars willing, they'll save me again.

'Leilani, are you sure you want to do this? There will be no turning back once you do.'

I stiffen as Orthriel's thoughts resonate inside my head, settling like lead weights down the bridge between our minds. I bristle at their reprimand. But, for all they're a thorn in my side, my Guardian is only thinking of my best interests. However much they disagree

with my plans to flee the city in search of the Book of Mysteries – the lost grimoire that once belonged to the Sisters themselves – ultimately, they'll always support me. Orthriel is loyal to the bone that way – if cielsylphs had any bones, that is.

I shift the weight of my pack, turn again for the city wall.

Skittering past the great dome of the Observatory, this is now the furthest I've ever travelled from the palace. My breaths come faster, pluming the air as I glance left and right. Still no sign of the Watchers, though they must be looking for me by now. My nerves are stretched moonbeam-thin, but the fist clenched tight around my heart loosens.

Maybe, just maybe, this will actually work.

I slip my hand inside my cloak pocket. My fingers curl around the Kingswrit – a forgery, but my best effort to date. It's not been for nothing, those hours of painstaking copy work. If I make it past the wall, a horse should be waiting, assuming the stable-boy hasn't betrayed me, forfeiting the bag of silver sickles my mother promised him. From there, it's only a short ride north to the Asteum. A few moonsrisings at most. The false letter should earn me admittance to Estelia's house of learning.

I won't be able to stay long; the Watchers will be crawling the realm as soon as I'm missed, and the Asteum is still officially under my father's dominion, for all the Highlanders maintain a precarious semi-independence from the Crystal Throne and claim control over the hills. My mother assures me the scholars adhere to the old ways, that historically the Highlanders were more sympathetic to the Branded, that they'll shelter me for as long as they can, that they might know the whereabouts of the Book of Mysteries, that they'll help me like they once promised to help her, before... before...

I can't think about that now. Can't risk spiralling into panic.

The narrow streets widen. I must be approaching the market square. I've never seen it, but Elvi, my liegemaids, has described it dozens of times. Before fresh rumours of Flamefever beyond the wall put an end to non-essential trade, she loved any excuse to walk here. She has a sweet tooth, and the market's mooncakes were

legendary. She always brought some back for me, along with tales of all she'd seen.

I draw my hood lower, but only a few citizens dot my path, and they keep their distance. Still, I catch up my pomander, lift it to my face. The vinegar makes my nose burn and eyes water, but one can't be too careful.

As I hoped, the good citizens of Meissa don't look twice at the girl made invisible by a drab, grey cloak.

The square is quiet, the crunch of feet on frost the only sound. No market traders cry out, no musicians play. Even its central fountain is frozen into silence – a monument my father only permits to stand as a deterrent. My gaze roams over the water-worn carvings. A heaving mass of prostrate bodies, both male and female, an undulating pattern of serpentine curves, faces contorted in expressions of despair. It depicts the Scouring.

Izarius, my tutor and the realm's foremost starscribe, showed me illustrations of this fountain almost nine sunrings ago, soon after I started my lessons with him. Told me about the many who'd sought Noelani Stellarion's lost talismans, in the hope my ancestor's necklet and sceptre, the property of a once-revered Elemagus – one of four formidable members of the Branded who changed Arcelia's fate forever – might reverse the Sickening. A fool's errand. My father outlawed the practice when he took the Throne. He decreed that the relics would never be found, dismissed any hopes of using them to mitigate the effects of the Sickening as the stuff of legend.

But oh, how the tale sparked my imagination. How I dreamt of succeeding where all others had failed. Night after lonely night, I clung to Izarius' story, whispering my foolish hopes to the darkness. I would find them, save my people, win back my father's love, make amends. Prove myself a worthy heir to the Crystal Throne.

I turn from the fountain. Those dreams were the dreams of an ignorant child, before I accepted that, for all his flaws, on this one issue, my father is right. Arcelia has been cursed to a slow, protracted death, inexorable as the three-mooned tide, and there's not a thing anyone can do to change it.

I may be Sistertouched, but I'm nothing like the Dawn Sister.

She created Arcelia; splintered her magic; siphoned the might of the Aethers to fashion the four cores that power its realms.

I have no such control over my magic. I create nothing; I only destroy.

We can only pray the Elemagi's wards hold, seek to protect Meissa from the onslaught as long as we can, and defend our city against the stubborn folly of the Highlanders, the greed and jealousy of the Outrealmers.

In place of the yeast and syrup of freshly fried mooncakes Elvi described, the only scent swirling the air as I scurry past the silenced fountain is the lingering char of ash. My stomach clenches. I fight the tide of painful memories that smell awakens. A persistent, unwelcome reminder that, try as my father might to pretend all is well in Meissa, the Sickening rages beyond the city wall.

Flamefever is spreading. Bodies are mounting up.

I glance back at the palace turrets, my mother's withered face rising before me again. She's getting worse, whatever the healers say. The idea of leaving her pains my chest and slows my feet. It's the reason I've never tried to escape in search of the Book of Mysteries before. My resolve wavers even now. But then I picture Astrophel's gloating expression, the gleam in his cold, grey eyes when the date for our binding ceremony was finally set.

I've done my best to avoid him, but what little I've seen of my betrothed since his return from the Asteum two moonscycles past has only confirmed my worst suspicions. The time away at school did nothing to improve him. He's as duplicitous as ever, still intent on licking my father's boots. I imagine him touching me in our nuptial bed and my stomach hollows. As I cross into the wider streets of the Northern Quarter, my feet itch to run again, despite the pinching snow-silk slippers I'm forced to wear.

A towering bank of starcrystal glimmers at the far end of the road. The city wall.

A few more minutes and I'll be free.

My shoulders sag in relief. I'm so tired. Tired of being shadowed every hour in case I make a mistake again, tired of being hidden

away like some shameful secret, tired of being punished for past crimes I can't take back.

I'm tired of being a monster.

Great change is coming.

I flinch from the small, knowing voice inside me. Light stipples my vision again, the silver tapestry thicker this time.

I don't see the woman crossing my path until it's too late.

A shrill cry slips her throat as our bodies collide. She skates on the ice-slicked cobblestones, tumbling back with a heavy thud. On instinct, I lift my gaze, blinking the threads of light away. Still no sign of the Watchers, thank the Stars, but the other Meissans dotting my path to the wall crane their necks, start swarming towards us.

Exactly the kind of attention I hoped to avoid.

Remembering whose cloak I'm wearing, I mumble an apology, humbly drop my gaze as I reach out to the fallen woman to help her to her feet.

'Keep your filthy mitts to yourself,' she snaps, batting my fingers away as if they're soiled. One hand reaches for her pomander, the other drops to her belly. I stiffen. It's peaked, almost spherical, straining hard against her sapphire-coloured gown, like she's swallowed one of the moons. My own stomach tightens as I step back. What if I've hurt her? Hurt the precious babe she's carrying?

It's been a long time since I've had to face a pregnant woman. They're kept from the palace, an unspoken rule to spare my parents. Stars know, they've suffered enough. And this close to term, expectant mothers are usually confined to their beds – a precaution to guard against the rising tide of neverborns. I make the sign of the Star and pray the Dawn Sister protects her child, whisper a second prayer that I'll be spared from sharing this woman's fate – at least, until I'm purged.

There's a reason my kind have been subject to a law of celibacy since the Sickening; it protects the Estelian people. My father may have rescinded it to allow this binding to take place, to secure his precious lineage, but I can't – I won't – birth a monster. I won't condemn another living soul to my half-life. I have to find the Book

of Mysteries. Perhaps with my curse, the First Runes will speak to me as they once did to Noelani. It might contain an incantation to purge the brandmagic away. To purify me. Perhaps then, my father will deem me worthy to bind to an equal rather than some bastard-born pretender. I could conceive untainted heirs, ensure the Stellarion succession continues unblemished.

'You ought to be more careful, peakscrub.' A balding man with a long silver beard jabs me in the ribs, elbows me out of the way to help the pregnant woman. I fight to keep my balance on the glassy cobbles, but as I stagger from the blow, my hood slips to my shoulders.

There's a collective gasp. The growing throng of Meissans checking the woman and her precious cargo are unharmed shuffle back. My name carries in whispers on the breeze.

I hunch over, tugging the hood back in place. But it's too late. They've seen me.

I look to the wall. I'll have to make a run for it.

'Princess?'

My breath catches low in my throat and I snap round. I recognise that voice, my liegemaids' accent still sharp and craggy, despite Elvi having lived in Meissa for most of her twenty sunrings.

Elvi's colouring singles her out too. Among a sea of silver-haired courtiers, hers is pearl-white – marking her as a peasant interloper from the abandoned peak territories. The ghost cities. Neither of us fits in; perhaps that's why we've always understood each other. But she's not the last of her kind. And while she might be scorned for her low-blood, she's not feared.

Elvi's silver cheeks are flushed pink with cold, her charcoal eyes unusually bright as she calls over her shoulder to someone and points at me.

No!

She's led the Watchers right to me.