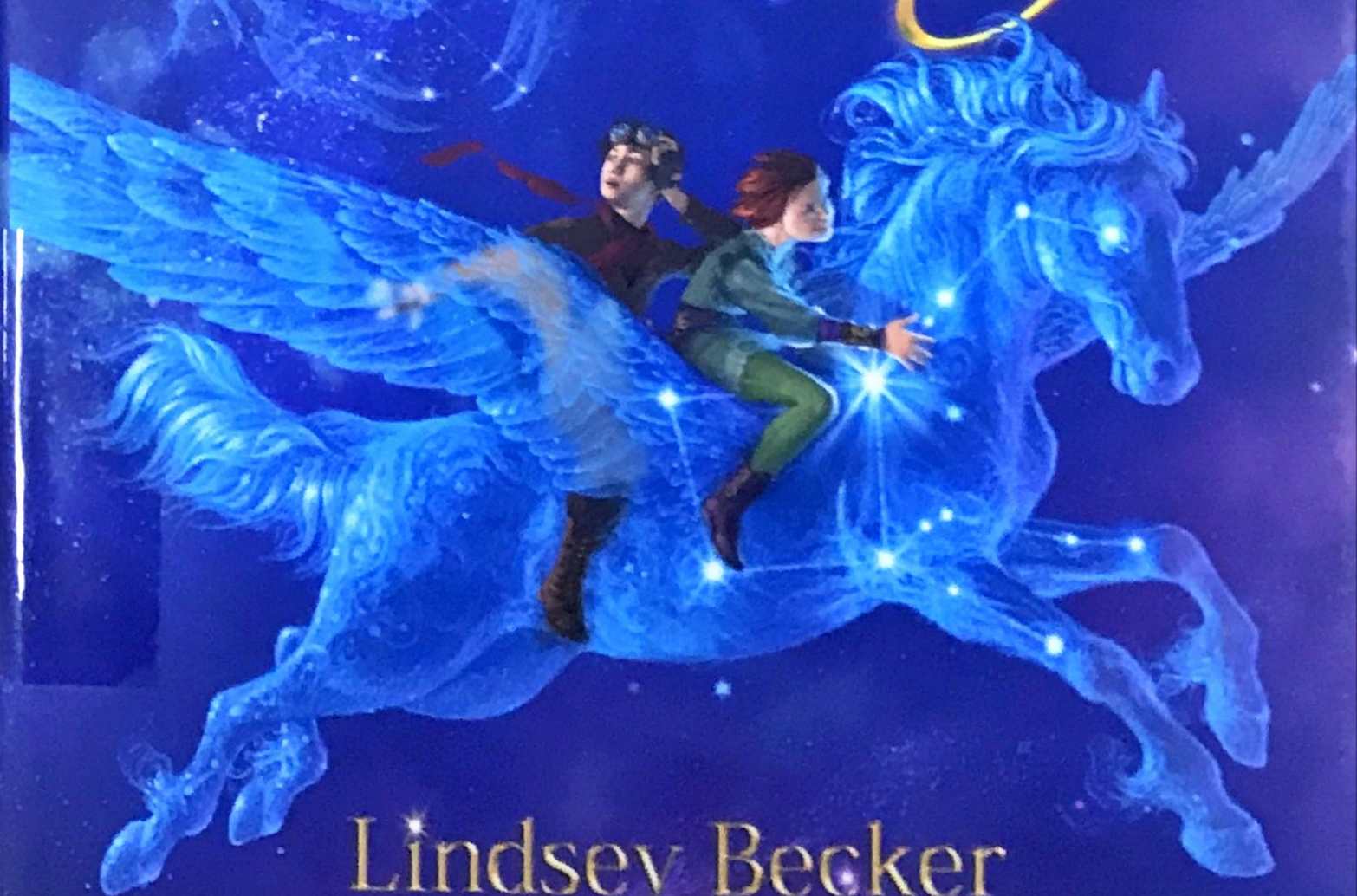


The Star Thief

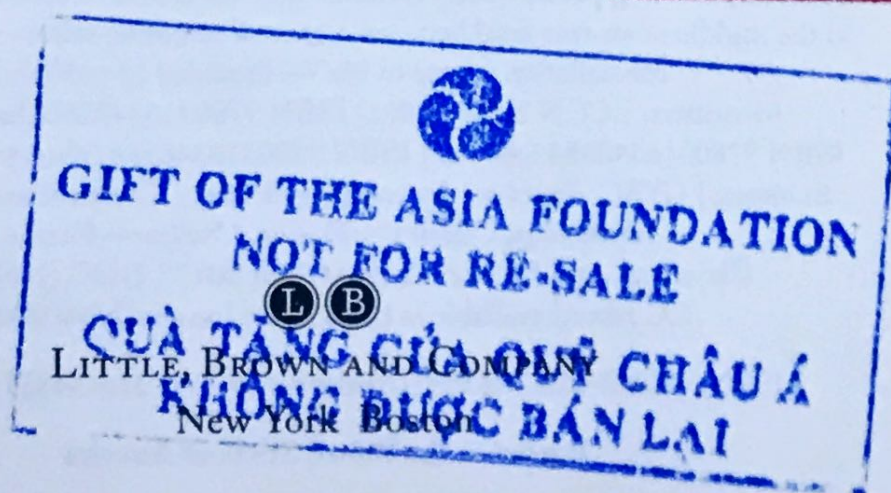


Lindsey Becker

The Star Thief

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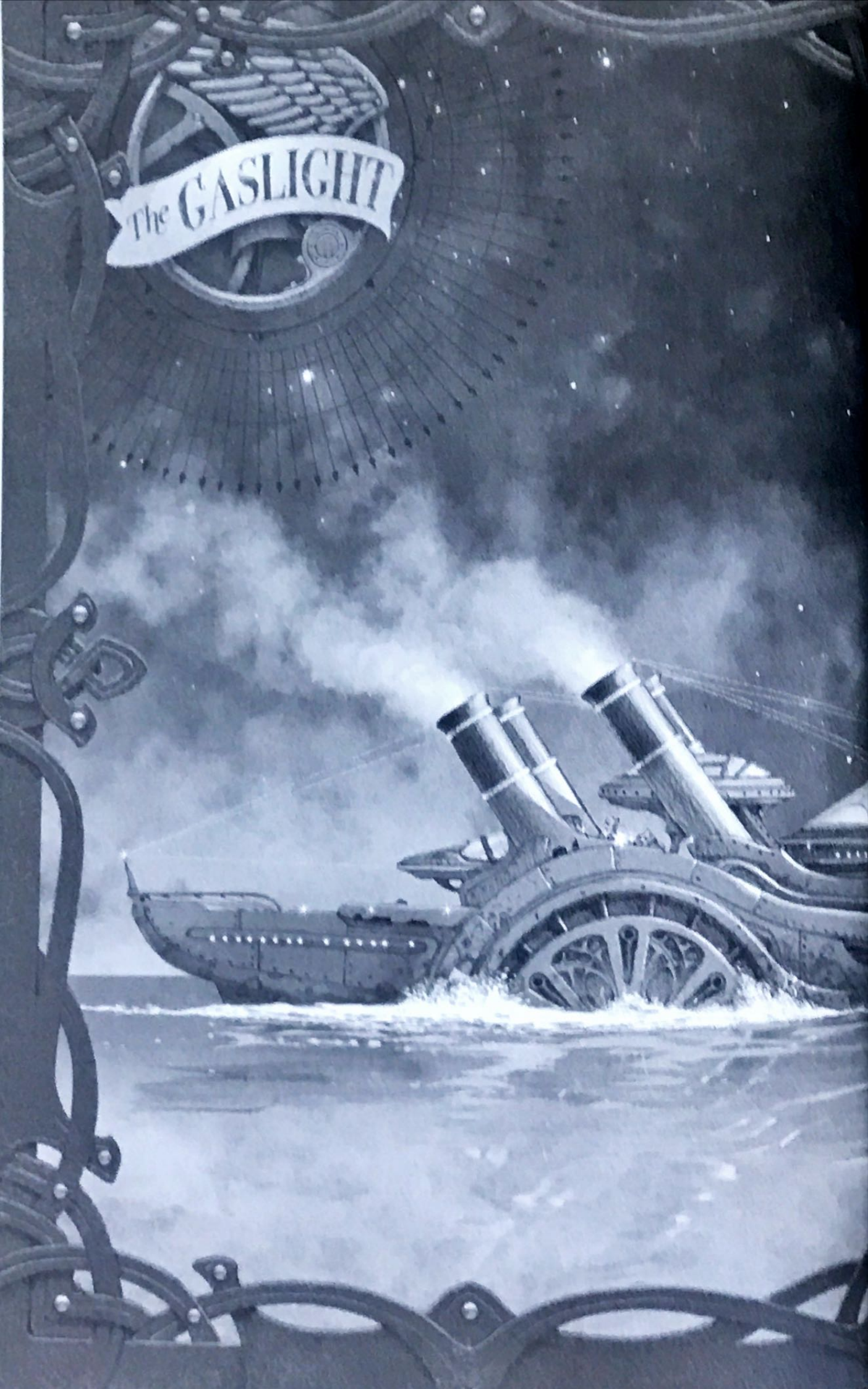
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For Katie and Sunshine

The GASLIGHT





CHAPTER

• 1 •

The Omen Stones



Honorine realized it was going to be a difficult night when she stepped into the east parlor to do a bit of light dusting and found it on fire.

“Sharps and mercenaries!” she said as a spray of hot embers erupted from the fireplace. There were plenty of other rooms in the enormous Vidalia Estate that might have burst into flames—like the empty bedrooms upstairs kept for guests who never arrived, or the pantry with its thousands of pieces of silver, which had to be polished even though no one used them—and she

might not have minded one bit. Instead, the room that had caught fire was the east parlor, Honorine's favorite room in the house. It was full of strange and delightful artifacts, books and bones, skulls and carved tusks, insects pinned inside shadowboxes, and glass cases of dead birds stuffed with oiled cotton, all acquired by Lord Vidalia on his extensive travels.

She quickly set down her dusting rags and lantern and went to work putting out the flames.

"Don't worry, sir," Honorine muttered as she stamped the smoldering rug with the worn heel of her boot. "I'll save your treasures!"

Lord Vidalia, as always, did not reply. He simply watched from the painting over the mantel, where he sat ever silently with his beautiful, elegant wife and their infant son, Francis, on the deck of a ship, surrounded by dark water and thousands of stars. It had been painted in 1879, according to the signature scrawled in the lower corner of the canvas, and was the only existing portrait of all three Vidalias together in the same frame, because shortly after it was finished, Lord Vidalia vanished.

Honorine hurried to get to every errant spark, stumbling around the furniture, the display cases, and

the mounted specimens of animals packed into the huge and terribly cluttered room. She tripped over a red fox as she stomped about on the rug, then grabbed the nearest vase of fresh cut roses, snuffed a burning ember in the mane of a regal Barbary lion, and ran straight under the belly of a giraffe to toss the contents of the vase—water, roses, and all—into the snarling fireplace. The flames expired at once, hissing out a tremendous ball of sooty smoke. Honorine winced as it washed over the oil painting above the mantel. She grabbed a broom and waved it about to clear the air.

“Who was supposed to be tending this fire, anyway?” she asked, but the specimens declined to reply. Fires burned throughout the night, even in the empty rooms of the manor house, because Lady Vidalia kept strange hours and was deathly afraid of the dark. But fires were always to be attended, no matter how tedious a chore it might be. This was the inspiration for Honorine’s lantern, a device of her own design and making. With more electric light, there would be less need for open flames burning all over the house and many fewer hours spent waiting around in otherwise empty rooms. Her latest prototype included a voltaic pile battery powering a squat lightbulb, which sat inside the glass chimney of an old