

CARISSA BROADBENT

DAUGHTER
— of —
NO WORLDS

THE WAR OF LOST HEARTS: VOL. I

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*For my Writing on the Wall crew.
This book is yours, and it would not exist without you.*

CONTENTS

| |
|-----------------------------------|
| <u>Prologue</u> |
| <u>Chapter 1</u> |
| <u>Chapter 2</u> |
| <u>Chapter 3</u> |
| <u>Chapter 4</u> |
| <u>Chapter 5</u> |
| <u>Chapter 6</u> |
| <u>Chapter 7</u> |
| <u>Chapter 8</u> |
| <u>Chapter 9</u> |
| <u>Chapter 10</u> |
| <u>Chapter 11</u> |
| <u>Chapter 12</u> |
| <u>Chapter 13</u> |
| <u>Chapter 14</u> |
| <u>Chapter 15</u> |
| <u>Chapter 16</u> |
| <u>Chapter 17</u> |
| <u>Chapter 18</u> |
| <u>Chapter 19</u> |
| <u>Chapter 20</u> |
| <u>Chapter 21</u> |
| <u>Chapter 22</u> |
| <u>Chapter 23</u> |
| <u>Chapter 24</u> |
| <u>Chapter 25</u> |
| <u>Chapter 26</u> |
| <u>Chapter 27</u> |
| <u>Chapter 28</u> |
| <u>Chapter 29</u> |
| <u>Chapter 30</u> |
| <u>Chapter 31</u> |
| <u>Chapter 32</u> |
| <u>Chapter 33</u> |
| <u>Chapter 34</u> |
| <u>Chapter 35</u> |
| <u>Chapter 36</u> |
| <u>Chapter 37</u> |
| <u>Chapter 38</u> |
| <u>Chapter 39</u> |
| <u>Chapter 40</u> |

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)

[Chapter 76](#)

[Chapter 77](#)

[Chapter 78](#)

[Chapter 79](#)

[Chapter 80](#)

[Epilogue](#)

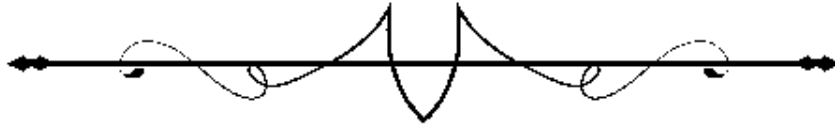
[Author's Note](#)

[Ashen Son: a 4-Part Prequel](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

PROLOGUE



It begins with two souls who find themselves suddenly, utterly alone.

Evaluate. Judge. Act.

The young man let the words echo like a second heartbeat.

He did not allow himself to acknowledge the possibility that he was going to die here. Not even as he slipped on blood, stumbled over bodies, mentally counted the men and women that had followed him into the city but would not follow him out. Not even as possibility crept closer and closer to certainty.

He was twenty-one years old. He had been in too many battles to count. But this? This wasn't a battle. This was a slaughter.

Evaluate. Judge. Act.

He pressed his back against the outer wall of a townhome, peering around the corner down a narrow city street. The roads were densely populated with crooked little houses that squished up against each other. Terrified faces peered from within them. Mothers tore their children away from the sight of steel and magic and fire mingling in a terrible, deadly dance.

Deep beneath his thoughts, the voice chuckled.

Shut up, he told it, and launched himself back into the fight. He flew through the streets, whispering to the flames beneath his breath, coaxing them to him. They complied eagerly, furling around his hands and up in his arms in spirals. He yanked them out of houses and off the streets, away from thin skin and fragile bones.

But there was too much. It consumed his energy and his focus. So

much so that he didn't even have time to evade when a sharp pain split his back. The warmth of blood melded with stinging, salty sweat.

Act, act, act.

He grit his teeth and spun in a well-practiced counter before the rebel could land another strike. The body hit the ground in a clumsy tangle of limbs. He didn't look at her face, grateful that it was covered by a mass of curly brown hair.

As if awakened by the smell of fresh blood, the voice leapt inside of him. *Kill it!* it hissed, throwing itself against the surface of his thoughts like claws gouging at a door.

No—

He paused a split second too long. A force collided with him, knocking him back into an alley. Instinct kicked in. His hands were already drawing his blade, poised at his attacker's throat before he even turned his head to see—

“Don't you dare kill me.” A warm, familiar voice murmured against his ear. “There are hundreds of rebels here who would love to do that instead.”

That voice. It was, in that moment, the most beautiful thing the young man had ever heard.

He exhaled a silent sigh of relief, dropping his dagger as he turned. “Where the hell did you go?”

The young woman greeted him with an unwavering, steely gaze. Her irises were so fair that they melted into the whites of her eyes, leaving pinpoint dark pupils watching him in an assessing stare. Soot and blood painted her cheeks, her white braids tangled and dirty. A coat hung from her shoulders that had once been blue. Now it was so spattered with red that it edged on purple, the stains crawling over the crescent moon insignia on her lapel.

The sight sent his heart lurching to his throat. “How much of that is yours?”

“How much of *that* is yours?” The woman grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him around.

“That bad?”

“Very bad.”

“Wonderful,” he grumbled. He'd hoped the wound wouldn't be as deep as it felt.

She turned him around, hands still gripping his arms, her face inches from his. “You're bleeding a lot. You don't feel that?”

Not anymore. He shook his head. The movement tilted the floor, as if

the world was a ship preparing to capsize. He imagined the sun on the back of his jacket cleaved in two by whatever blade sliced his back, the halves sliding with him, separating in the sky—

“Hey.” Her fingers were at his face, snapping in front of his eyes. She looked angry, but he knew her well enough to know that it only masked her fear. Just as she had been when they had ventured into the forest for the first time as children, when they had wandered around lost for hours until—

“*Wake. Up.*” This time she shook him, too. “Stay with me.”

He felt something encroach at the edge of his thoughts — a brush of her presence. Her magic reaching into his mind. “Don’t do that,” he growled.

The voice chuckled something disgusting, far away.

“I’m just checking on you.” Her presence retreated as the line between the young woman’s eyebrows deepened. “I went to the west end of the city. So many dead.”

So many dead.

The young man blinked away the image of the little faces peering from shattered windows.

“We have to retreat,” he said. “There are too many townspeople here for this. I can take the fire as we go.”

“Their leadership is here. Retreating isn’t an option. Too good of an opportunity.”

He almost laughed. Bitter and ugly and humorless. “*Opportunity?* No, this is—“

“They chose to start this here, in one of their cities,” she spat. “If they want to shit in their own beds, they can lie in it.”

The words hit him like a strike to his gut. He wasn’t sure it was her callousness or the blood loss that made his stomach clench with nausea.

“These are still civilians,” he shot back. “Rebellion or no. These are *people.*”

“We have options.”

“Not with what I’ve seen.”

“We have *you,*” she whispered. One hand traveled to his face, hovering over the muscles that clenched his jaw. “*We have you.*”

A shiver shuddered through his deepest recesses. He stood there, lips parted but unable to conjure words strong enough to match his revulsion.

The best he managed was, “*Hell, no.*”

Her mouth thinned. If he had been paying attention, he might have noticed her caress migrating to his temple, pushing aside strands of black

hair.

“We don’t have a choice,” she whispered. “Please.”

“No. We’re in the middle of a city. And—“

And what? And so many things. Too many to encapsulate in words. Just the thought of it prickled shards of icy horror in his veins.

“I’m sorry,” he said, quietly. “But the destruction would be— and I—
“

It was probably the first time he had ever failed to do what was in the Orders’ best interest. But all he could think about were those little faces in the windows.

She looked for a moment as if she might push further, but then something shifted, softened, in her expression. Her lips twisted into a sad smile. “That bleeding heart will get you killed one day, you know.”

Maybe, the young man thought.

{Likely}, the voice whispered.

There was a long silence. And then, finally, she simply said, “I am your commanding officer.”

He almost questioned his sanity, questioned whether he heard her correctly. “You’re— what?”

A laugh skittered through his thoughts, jeering at the dread that clenched his heart.

“Targis is dead. I saw him.” She looked up at him with bright eyes. Reflections of flames glittered in their dampness — the only sign of emotion. “With him gone, I am your commanding officer. And I command you to utilize the full extent of your abilities.”

Her words split him in two, a pain so sharp that it felt as if someone had grabbed the top of his spine and ripped it through his skin. “*Nura—“*

“I command you to do it.”

And that was when he noticed her hand at his temple. When he noticed her magic reaching further than that, into his thoughts, to that door that he had slammed shut, nailed shut, *bolted* shut —

“*No.*”

The word was the only thing that he could choke out in one ragged gasp, the rest dying in his throat as he felt her reach deeper into his mind.

It was the one thing she swore she’d never do.

He threw whatever remaining strength he had into reinforcing his mental walls, but he would never be as strong when it came to these things as she was. Her magic was born in the world of thoughts and shadows, while his were far more suited to brighter, more immediate forces. Especially now, with more and more blood rolling down his back, and that

creature fighting desperately to get out.

“Stop—“ A burst of pain blinded him. He felt her pry open that door, crushing it, discarding it.

Her lips formed the word, “Sorry,” but if she said it aloud, he didn’t hear it.

{So sweet,} the voice whispered, so near and so real that goosebumps rose on the crest of his ear. *{You always try so hard.}*

Fuck you.

His hands dropped from her arms. Fingers stretched. Then clenched, releasing a cacophony of cracks.

If he was capable of speaking, he would have told her that he would never — *never* — forgive her for this.

But he was not capable of speaking. He was not capable of anything but hurling himself against his own mental wall, over and over again, in a desperate attempt to regain control.

Even as it slipped further from his reach.

Even as his palms opened and he was blinded by fire and fire and fire.



ACROSS THE SEA

The little girl was amazed by how quiet it all was.

The slavers had come in the middle of the night, yanking her little village from a deep slumber. Like most of her kin, many of her nightmares revolved around this moment. At some point, it had become an omnipresent danger constantly lurking in the back of her mind.

But the real thing was different than the nightmares.

She had always imagined that there would be more noise — more screaming, more shouting, more drawn-out fighting. But the men in the wide-brimmed hats and their team of mercenaries had struck the youngest and strongest men first, hobbling them in their beds before they had a chance to cause trouble. And even the ones who did fight back were surprisingly quiet, their battles little more than muffled grunts and blunt steel, ending shockingly quickly with trembling final gasps.

The girl’s mother, their leader, had not spoken to her as they were woken by the sounds of horse’s hooves and crying wives. Her only comfort was a quiet hand on the child’s shoulder. When they had stepped outside the door, she had taken one look at her village — her people, or

what was left of them after such a swift destruction — and offered terms to the slavers.

The girl was no more than thirteen, but she knew that her mother was trying to save her people from the inevitable. She also knew that it wouldn't work. Aside from her mother's brief, hushed commands, no one said a word.

That is, until the little girl stepped forward, looked up at one of the slavers and those glinting dark eyes, and said, "You can get a better price for me."

The words slipped from her teeth before she even fully realized what she was doing. The slaver was less intimidating than she had imagined. He was short, and fat. His long leather coat was wrinkled and strained to contain the pudgy width of his shoulders, and strained further still as he shifted to look at her. She knew that he was taking in her unusual appearance: her skin and hair that was totally white, completely sapped of color, while splotches of what would have been her natural deeper coloring crawled across her skin. One green eye, one white. Streaks of dark mingling in silver hair.

Behind her, she heard her mother take a step forward, as if to stop her. She didn't turn.

"You can get a better price for me," she said again. It took every bit of her strength not to let her voice crack or tremble. She focused on the wobbling of the fat slaver's lower chin. One tendril of her mind reached out towards his, listening for glimmers of his thoughts. His greed smelled like sweat in the air.

"Maybe if you were complete," he grumbled, after a moment. He took a strand of white hair between his fingers, then lifted her chin, turning her cheek, examining the swath of tan that encroached on the right side of her face. "But this—"

"What?" Another slaver joined the first, his black hat crumpled in one hand as he wiped sweat from his brow. This one was thin, all knobby joints and gaunt cheeks. The girl forced herself to recognize how funny they looked together. Fat and thin. Tall and short. Like clowns. Not monsters.

"Look at this one."

"She's Fragmented. Not a real Valtain. And too young to whore anyway."

The fat slaver shrugged. "By some standards."

Even with her magic, the girl rarely felt even a hint of her mother's tightly-held emotions. But at this, a shock of furious panic shook her like a

thunderclap.

Still, she did not turn.

“She’s not worth anything,” the thin slaver said. “Maybe if she was complete.”

Words tangled in the girl’s throat. The men were starting to turn away from her, looking to their soldiers, who shackled the men at the front of the village. In a panic, she opened her palms and a butterfly of light flew from her hands, batting through the air until it collided with the fat slaver’s face.

“Look,” she said, desperately. Another butterfly. And another. “I am a Wielder. I can perform. You can get a good price for me. Better than the mines.”

The two slavers watched the butterflies rise into the sky, disappearing against the unbroken silver moon. They looked at each other, communicating wordlessly.

“She’ll be pretty, eventually,” the fat one said, slowly. “Young, but... you ever buy unripened fruit at the market?”

The thin slaver crossed his arms over his chest, surveying her in a way that made her skin feel as if ants were crawling up her spine.

“She can cook, too. Clean. Very obedient.” Her mother’s voice came from behind her. Suddenly, it become so much more difficult to remain composed.

Now both slavers crossed their arms. The little girl’s eyes flicked between them.

“Fine.” The thin one let his arms drop, yanking his hat back onto his head. “Take her. We’ll sell her in En-Zaheer to one of those peacocks.”

“Wait!” the girl cried, as the slaver grabbed her arm. “My mother must come too.”

The slaver scoffed, as if this didn’t even dignify a response.

“Please. I need her. She—“

The thin slaver’s eyes flashed, and the girl felt his anger curdle in the air like rotten milk. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, her mother was at her side, hands clutching her shoulders.

“She is young and afraid,” she said, quickly. “She doesn’t know what she’s saying. I understand that I cannot go with her.”

Her mother spun the girl around to face her, hands still braced on her shoulders. For the first time since this horrible nightmare began, the girl allowed herself to meet her mother’s eyes directly. They were bright amber-green, identical to the little girl’s colored right eye. In that split second, she took in her mother’s familiar face — high, regal cheekbones, dark brows that framed a piercing, calm gaze. She had never seen her

mother visibly scared or shaken. Even today, that did not change.

“None of us can follow where you go, Tisaanah. But you have everything you need to survive. And listen to me — *use it.*”

The girl nodded. Her eyes burned.

“Never look back. And never question stepping forward and saying, ‘I deserve to live.’”

“*You* deserve to live,” the girl whimpered. The mines were a death sentence. Everyone knew it.

Her mother’s face flickered, a glimmer of sad uncertainty rippling across her features. “None of that,” she said, flicking away the tears before they fell. And that was all she offered, before she pressed her lips to her daughter’s forehead in one final goodbye kiss.

She straightened, lifting her chin as she looked from one slaver to the other, then back to her people, who lined up bound by rope and chain. In that moment, she had never looked more a queen, noble and breathtaking even as she offered her hands for binding.

The fat trader took the little girl away, dragging her into the back of their cart, while the thin one led away the rest of her village. She sat among bags of grain and boxes of kitschy merchant’s goods, back pressed to the splintering boards. Soon, her friends and family were silver-dipped silhouettes in the distance — one long line, backs straight, chins raised, the unmistakable form of her mother at the front of them all.

Behind them, the village burned in smears of garish orange flames.

She never thought it would be so fast — so quiet. It took less than an hour for her entire life to change, disintegrating into the night like one of her shimmering butterflies.

“No tears for your mother, huh?” One of the mercenaries peered over his shoulder, letting out a scoff. “Cold.”

“They’re always like that,” the slaver said, matter-of-factly. “Unsentimental.”

You did this, the little girl wanted to scream. *You refused to take her with me*. She wanted to shout, she wanted to sob. She wanted to let herself collapse on this dirty cart floor, pound the wood with useless fists, weep until she vomited.

But instead, she was still, her back straight and her chin raised, pantomiming her mother’s stone strength. She bit down so hard on the inside of her lip that warm iron flooded over her tongue. The echo of her mother’s kiss burned on her forehead.

You have what you need to survive, her mother had told her. The girl had no possessions other than her sweaty nightgown, but she knew she had

tools. On that long, dark ride to the city, she counted them, over and over again. She had her unusual appearance, looks that might one day turn into something worth desiring. She was a good listener and a fast learner. She had her magic — silver butterflies and pretty illusions, yes, but more importantly, she had the ability to *feel* what people wanted of her.

And, most valuable of all, she had the gift that her mother had given her: permission to do whatever it took to survive, without apology, without regret. She would do absolutely anything, except cry.

PART ONE:
WINGS



CHAPTER ONE

EIGHT YEARS LATER



1, 2, 3...

When I danced, I never stopped counting.

The truth was, I was a terrible dancer. I wasn't sure that I believed in the concept of talent at all, but even if I did, I could recognize that I didn't have any. At least when it came to dancing. But talent, I had learned, was optional. It could be substituted with long nights and early mornings, bleeding feet, obsessively memorized footwork.

No one needed talent when you had brute force. And, despite my willowy size and my unassuming doe-eyed smile, I had more brute force than anyone.

...4, 5, 6...

Twirl.

And— fire.

I smiled at the merchant man seated in front of me, opening my palms to let blue fire unfurl from between my fingers. The audience, Esmaris's party guests, *ooh*-ed and *aah*-ed appreciatively. There were several hundred people mingling about the large marble room, all dressed in their finest clothing. Lots of gold thread and floaty, sheer chiffon. Lots of white. Rich people loved white, perhaps because it proved that they had the money to spend on a small army of slaves to keep it clean.

All of those white-clad bodies bent towards me in that moment, rapt, as I unleashed a wave of my signature translucent butterflies into the air. Four dozen of them fluttered to the high ceiling and disappeared, unraveling into puffs of blue smoke.

All except for three.

Three fluttered to three separate men in the audience, circling their necks, flitting against their cheeks before they disappeared.

Every one of the men flinched as the butterfly approached, then laughed with varying degrees of enthusiasm when they realized they felt like nothing but air. Their gazes had been glued to me this entire time, and I could tell that they were itching for the opportunity to throw coins in my direction, if I used what I had correctly.

I focused on the youngest one first, a merchant man perhaps only a few years older than myself. He had something to prove. New money. I danced closer to him, and as my fingers reached out to flirtatiously touch his shoulder, my mind did too — tasting the air for his thoughts, his preferences. This one, it turned out, had no preference for me at all. In fact, I could feel his attention being constantly pulled toward Serel, one of Esmaris’s handsomer bodyguards, who lingered in the far corner of the room.

That was fine. He didn’t have to want to screw me to serve my purposes. If anything, it made things easier for me — he would be overly eager to prove his virile interest in a scantily-clad dancer like myself, rather than a scantily-clad guard like Serel. And he wouldn’t try to get me alone once the dance ended.

The strings of the harp plinked on, but there might as well have been no music at all. My dance was memorized. My feet didn’t stop moving as I coiled my arms around the merchant’s neck. “I left something over here,” I purred, pulling my fingers from behind the edge of his jaw and revealing one of my twinkling butterflies. “She likes you. Would you like to keep her?”

The young merchant smiled at me. He was handsome, with curly brown hair and big amber eyes framed by lashes so long that they made me jealous.

He and Serel would make a beautiful couple, really.

“I would,” he said, staring at me too-intently, even though his thoughts told me that he had no interest in keeping her at all. What he *did* have an interest in was showing that he could hold his own in this room of wildly rich and wildly successful people — even against Esmaris himself. He lifted a hand as if to take the glowing butterfly from me, but I twirled backwards, smirking at him coyly.

“What will you give me for her?”

I caught a glimpse of Esmaris over the young man’s shoulder. He was clad in a shock of color — bright red — which stood out in a sea of white. He didn’t need to prove his wealth or status, after all, with his choice of clothing. But even beyond the shade of his shirt, there was still something about him that separated him from the crowd. A certain cool, authoritative

air, like he strode through the world expecting it to bend to him. It usually did.

He was engaged in a conversation with one of his guests, looking vaguely bored. His hair — black but streaked with grey — was bound back in a low ponytail, with one unruly strand that he kept sweeping behind his ear. Mid-movement, he glanced up to meet my eyes. Our eye contact lasted for a fraction of a second before he looked back to his guest, unconcerned.

Good. He wasn't usually possessive, but better to be careful.

"You already have my admiration," the young merchant said, and it physically pained me not to roll my eyes.

"Valuable indeed," I cooed instead. "But so is she, isn't she?" The butterfly's wings trembled against my fingertips. I closed my fingers around it, and when I opened them, a little glass version of my illusion sat in my palm. For a moment I couldn't help but admire it, proud of myself. This was a new addition to my routine.

The merchant's eyebrows arched, and I felt his impressed surprise rippling the inches between our faces.

"For you."

"That is incredible." The man's pleasant smile split into a full-on grin. In that awestruck gaze, I could see what he might have looked like as a child, enthralled by some circus acrobat or shiny bauble. When those beautiful eyes met mine again, we shared a moment of genuine connection.

And then he reached into his pocket. "For *you*." He took the glass butterfly from my hand, and in its place, dropped five gold coins into my palm.

Five.

Gold.

I blinked down at them, momentarily speechless. I wasn't a fool — I knew that there was a reason why he dropped the pieces so loudly into my hand, why he was doing this while everyone's eyes were on us. It was bold, even rude, of him to give me money without so much as seeking a glance of wordless permission from Esmaris, never mind money like *this*. Many did not like their slaves to have money at all, and more still did not like that money to come from other men. In both of these ways, Esmaris was quite liberal, but *five gold* was skirting the bounds of respectability by any measure.

One thousand and two.

I wasn't expecting to hit that number that night, or the night after, or

after that. I was lucky if I left one of Esmaris's parties with ten silver pieces.

One thousand and two. One thousand and two.

"Thank you," I choked out, forgetting to be coquettish. I closed the coins in my palm, relishing their weight as I slipped them into the tiny silk purse at my hip. "Thank you."

The man smiled and nodded at me, oblivious to what he had just done for me.

Excitement and elation bubbled up inside of me. For a moment, I was lost in it. Then the sound of the harp came roaring back, and I realized that I almost missed my cue.

I wanted to jump up and down and spin around and laugh. But I had hours of performing left to do. So I began to count again.

1, 2, 3, 4...

Before I twirled away, I ran my fingertips along the merchant's cheek, through his admirable thick curls. And I smiled, and smiled, and smiled. As I cascaded across the marble floor, Serel caught my eye from across the room and cocked his head, asking me a silent question. In response, I only grinned. Perhaps he would know what it meant.

One thousand and two.

One thousand gold was the price of my freedom.