

A
CROWNS OF NYAXIA
NOVEL

The background of the cover is a light, ethereal grey. A large, ornate quill pen with a golden-brown body and a dark, pointed nib is positioned diagonally across the center. It is surrounded by falling red petals and golden sparks. In the bottom right, there is a large, vibrant red flower. The title text is overlaid on this background.

THE
SONGBIRD
& THE HEART
OF STONE

THE SHADOWBORN DUET BOOK ONE
CARISSA BROADBENT
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
SONGBIRD
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A CROWNS OF NYAXIA NOVEL

The Shadowborn Duet

BOOK ONE

CARISSA BROADBENT

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The Songbird and the Heart of Stone

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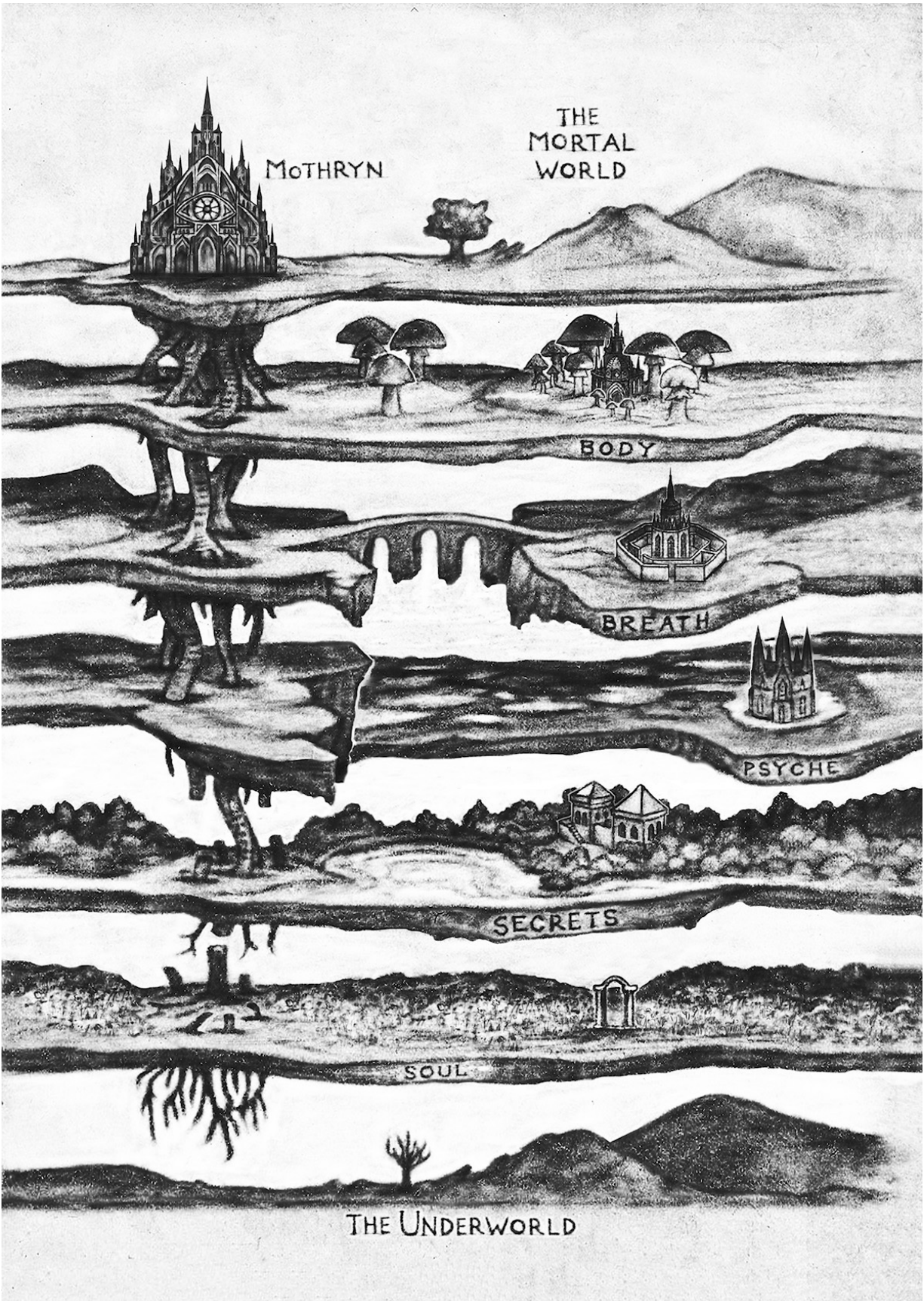
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For every lost soul who just needs someone to listen

Author's note:

Please note that this book contains subject matter that may be difficult for some readers, including graphic violence, on-page sexual content, discussion of grooming and child abuse, and infant death (off page).



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PROLOGUE

This is the tale of how a chosen one falls.

Like most legends, it is unremarkable at its start. There was nothing special about the girl when the sun god chose her. He had his pick. He was among the most revered of the gods among his mortal followers. Every dawn and every sundown saw countless offerings upon his altars, food and silks and riches and soft bodies—every mortal pleasure a god could desire. He was particular with his favor. He chose for himself only the most flawless faces, the most powerful warriors, the most skilled sorcerers.

This girl was none of those things.

The two sisters arrived at the temple with nothing else in the world but each other. If they did not find shelter here, they would be cast back out to die, like countless other faceless innocents.

It always begins like this. In times of great darkness, humans crawl to light like flies to the gleaming silver of a spider's silk. These are the souls that gods feast upon. No one loves you more than someone who has no one else.

The older sister was almost beautiful, save for the stench of her difficult life and all she had done to survive it. She had scrounged together a silk dress designed to highlight her curves, carefully draped to hide the stains. She had thick, dark hair, lush lips, smooth skin—delicate in all the ways the

gods typically enjoyed. She collapsed at the altar of her god, prayers spilling from her lips. She swore to him her faith, her life, her soul, all as the priests watched with curls of disgust over their lips. She was, in their eyes, not the type who was worthy of salvation.

Perhaps the young woman hoped that the candles arranged around the altar would burst to life as she offered her god her soul—a sign of the sun god taking a new chosen.

But the god accepted her fealty with only vague disinterest. He had been gifted thousands of other desperate souls just like this one today.

No, it was not the young woman who interested him.

It was the child with her.

She trailed behind her sister, eyes bigger, hair wilder, staring up at the sky no matter how many times the priests hissed at her to lower her lashes in supplication. She listened to her sister's tearful offerings and watched the priests' disapproving stares, and though she was only eight years old, she understood what would happen after this.

She had nothing to offer. And what would a god want from her, anyway?

Still, she reached into her pocket and closed her fingers around a fragile little reminder of her home. The shape of it was burned into her palm. She withdrew it and slid her own offering across the altar:

A feather.

Like the girl herself, the feather was not remarkable. It was small, a dull gold, bent and half-bare from weeks of the little girl's absentminded grasp.

So why did this gift—this child—capture the god's attention so?

The god's other chosen had been glorious men and women, flowers plucked at the height of their splendor. This girl was pretty enough, but no great beauty. Smart enough, but no great wit. Perhaps he enjoyed the uniquely mortal slant of her smile or the way her freckles fell across her nose.

Or perhaps gods, like mortals, are simply mesmerized by their own damnation.

Because he paused then, peering through the veil between worlds, at this little girl.

The little girl, in turn, peered back.

In the background, the priests grew tired of her sister's weeping pleas. They took hold of her arms, dragging her away. Her sister's protests and the priests' harsh chiding faded into a hazy hum in the background. She lifted her chin to the sky.

And for many years later—decades, centuries—the child would not forget what her god's voice sounded like the first time she heard it:

I see you, little one. Reach out your hand.

The magic came to her so easily. As if it burned straight from her heart itself. The clouds thinned, the honeyed sunlight hot on her face. One by one, the candles around the altar blossomed to flame.

And at last, fire ignited in her splayed palm.

It took the others a moment to realize what was happening. But by the time she held the flame in her hands, the priests were gasping in awe. Her sister watched, wide-eyed, silent.

The little girl did not see any of them. She just stared up at the sky, cheeks aching with her grin and warm with the love of her god. She had finally found something that she had been chasing her entire short, fraught life. She would not know how to describe this for a very long time. But the word she was searching for was: *purpose*.

The sun god thought he had received another devoted acolyte that day. Even he could not describe what he found so charming about the child, but what did it matter? She would be another chosen one to add to his collection, happy to receive his attention when it suited him and easy to put aside when it didn't. She would follow him until the end of it all, just as all the others had.

He was right. For a time.

But such a boring story that would be.

This is the tale of how a chosen one falls. She does it screaming, clawing for her old life with broken fingernails. She does it slowly, over the course of

decades.

And in the end, she takes the whole forsaken world with her.



PART ONE



LIFE

CHAPTER ONE

The dark went on forever. The candle would not light.

Sweat rolled down my brow. I sagged against the bars of my cell, eyes fixed on the unlit candle, which stood crooked and dusty within a cobweb-coated lantern that dangled from a hook on the opposite side of the room. It was precariously close to a heavy velvet curtain, once green but now dull with long-dried blood.

One spark.

One spark, and the candle would go up, and then the curtains, and then I would have a flame big enough to manipulate even now, with my diminished magic. Once, I wouldn't even have needed the candle at all. Once, I could've summoned the power of the sun in my palm. I could have burned my way out of here. Vampires were never quite prepared for it—the sun. They definitely never expected it to come from me, a vampire girl with big eyes and a bigger smile. I could always get so far on that.

My arm strained through the bars. A shaky breath escaped through gritted teeth as blood dripped a melody onto the floor. I reached for the magic that had once come as easily for me as breathing. Reached for the god who had once chosen me.

Please, my light, I begged him silently. Please.

But it had been more than a year now since Atroxus had answered my prayers. More than a year since I'd felt the warmth of his magic at my fingertips. Each attempt opened burns instead, as if to mock me: *What else does the sun have to offer a vampire?*

Tonight was no different.

I tried until my body gave out on me. Then I collapsed.

I pressed my forehead against the bars, shutting my eyes against the sting of tears and blood. I was covered in it. A lot of it was mine, but not all. The soldiers from the House of Shadow had killed a merchant, too, when they came for me. I relived the look on the merchant's face as the Shadowborn arrow had pierced his throat, the way the soldiers had casually tossed his body aside as they descended upon me. He'd been kinder to me than I deserved. Maybe he took pity on me, a dirty, broken-down traveler in the middle of nowhere.

How had they found me? I'd been on my own for months now, and I was so careful to leave as little a trail as possible. Of the three vampire kingdoms, the House of Shadow had the greatest mastery of spycraft. They dealt in secrets, emotions, knowledge. If anyone could root out a single criminal, I supposed the Shadowborn were best equipped for it.

But I'd still been miles away from the border of the House of Shadow. And I was just one girl. They came for me like they knew exactly where I'd be.

Then again, I wasn't "just" anything. I had murdered a prince of the House of Shadow.

I wasn't stupid. I knew it would catch up to me eventually. That was why I'd left the House of Night, wasn't it? To shield my friends from the consequences of my actions.

At least there was that.

My head swam. Maybe from the blood loss. Maybe not.

I choked back a sob and slipped my hand into my pocket. It was empty, as I knew it would be. The Shadowborn soldiers had taken all my possessions. I'd been half-conscious as they rummaged through them, their

magic binding my thoughts, but I still had almost managed to reach out as they took Raihn's letters.

Raihn's unopened letters.

He had sent me so many of them. Oraya sent a few, too. They'd come to me if I was close enough to the capital of the House of Night, sent by their magic. Every week or two, I'd take a detour to circle back into range, and I'd cradle those wrinkled pieces of parchment like precious riches. I could imagine what they said. Raihn's scrawled handwriting: *Where the hell are you, Mish?* Oraya's looping script: *Don't make me send Jesmine to go hunt you down.*

I could never make myself read them, though.

I couldn't make myself throw them away, either.

I fiercely regretted both decisions now. I could still see Raihn's face in the moment I'd told him I was leaving. That puppy-dog look of utter hurt. The memory made another near sob bubble up in my throat.

Gods, I had made so many mistakes.

I jumped at the sudden sound of stone grinding against stone.

The door swung open, strings of cold light flooding over the ground. I lifted my head and was punished with a powerful wave of dizziness. More blood dripped onto the floor.

A woman and a man stood in the door. The woman was nobility. I knew it the second I looked at her. She was tall and straight-backed, her hands folded delicately in front of her. Long tendrils of deep chestnut hair tumbled down her shoulders. She wore a gown of emerald velvet that wrapped tight around her body and brushed the floor. The bodice was tight, pushing her breasts up against a low neckline. A classic example of the Shadowborn style of dress—expensive stuff. She stepped forward, surveying me with a cold, piercing gaze.

Something about her was familiar in a way that crawled under my skin. It went beyond her appearance. I could *feel* it, even if I couldn't place it.

Her companion closed the door behind her. Him, I recognized right away. He was a hulking man, with slicked-back dark hair and fine leather

armor, a cloak that matched his mistress's dress falling down his back. My gaze locked onto that cape. He hadn't changed it since he'd dragged me in here. It was ruined. My blood was all over it.

The woman stood silently as her guard returned and opened the cell doors. She stepped into the cell.

"Get up," she said.

Her voice was flawless, melodic, and for those two syllables, it was the most entrancing thing I had ever heard. My body was broken. And yet, at her command, I *wanted* to stand. No other possibility existed, every alternate snapped away like branches from a vine.

I was on my feet before I made the decision to rise.

Shadowborn magic, I realized. The magic of minds and compulsion, illusion and shadow.

When little human children in a country half a world away told scary stories at night, the vampires of the House of Shadow were the monsters that came to them in their nightmares. Sure, the Nightborn were intimidating, with the wings and the swords and all that battle prowess. The Bloodborn were frightening the way rabid wolves were, vicious and unpredictable.

But the Shadowborn were like ghosts. They manipulated reality itself. They drank up the darkness like wine and relished the notes of fear within it.

The woman circled me slowly. I swayed. My mind had obeyed her command, but my body wasn't actually capable of standing right now. The floor felt like it was tilting.

Talk your way out of this, Mische, I told myself. But words, for maybe the first time in my life, felt so far away. And I couldn't find any before she stopped in front of me, surveying me feet to head, and gave me a cruel, unimpressed smile.

That was what did it. The smile.

The realization barreled into me. Who she was. Why she looked so familiar.

My eyes widened.

A little ripple of pleasure passed between us as she chuckled.