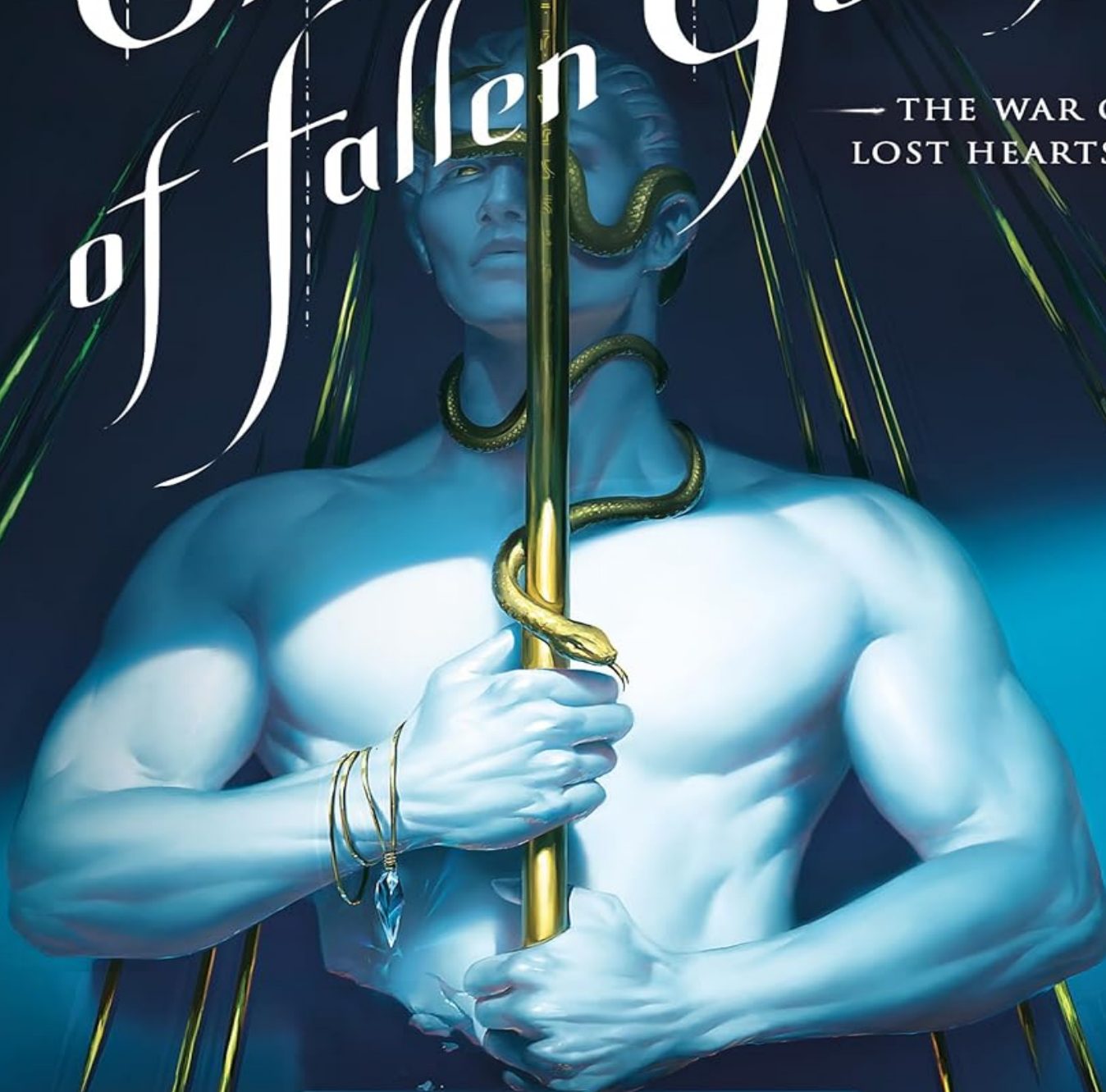


Children of Fallen Gods

A muscular man with a snake around his neck, holding a spear. The man is depicted from the waist up, wearing a golden headband and a snake around his neck. He is holding a golden spear with both hands. The background is dark blue with golden spears or arrows pointing upwards.

— THE WAR OF
LOST HEARTS II —

CARISSA BROADBENT

— #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR —

CHILDREN *of* FALLEN GODS

THE WAR OF LOST HEARTS: VOL. II

CARISSA BROADBENT

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For you.

*The fact that you're reading this right now is the coolest thing ever. Thank
you. I hope you love it.*

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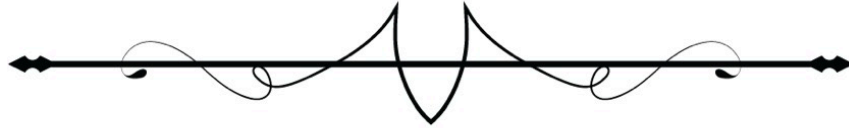
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PROLOGUE



It began with a whisper and it will end with a scream. What comes between is a dance of fate's tangled threads.

I believed in fate once, or something like it. I believed in gods and deities and the guiding faith of a grand plan. Why did it comfort me so, to believe that I was merely one small piece of something bigger? Why did I revel in the thought of my own insignificance? Perhaps it was because I was so desperately lonely, and I treasured that innate connection — *you cannot leave me, for we are part of the same path.*

I no longer believe in such things. Surely if the gods existed, they would have spoken to me by now. I linger close enough to death to smell it, close enough to press my fingers against the frosted glass that separates me from their world. I peer through and see nothing but dust and bones.

I have learned that there are few certainties in life or death, but one of them is that bones do not speak. Dust does not sing.

So I sing to myself instead, in off-key fragments of forgotten lore, craving the warmth of a heartbeat.

It began with a whisper and it will end with a scream. What comes between is still to be seen.

And so I wait.

PART ONE:

FLAME



CHAPTER ONE



he air hit my chest all at once. My eyes snapped open to a pit of darkness. Sweat plastered my hair to my neck and the rough sheets to my skin. The blood rushing in my ears drowned out the sounds of the ship — the wood creaking, the ocean churning, the steady breaths of the sleeping passengers around me.

T *{Something is coming.}*

The whisper circled my mind, flooding me with directionless panic. Every time I blinked, Reshaye's memories assaulted me — a flash of golden hair, a room of white and white and white, and the overwhelming feeling that something unseen loomed just past the horizon, reaching for me.

For us.

Slowly, I sat up. Rising to my feet, I channeled Reshaye my calm, or at least, as much of it as I could force. I had to move very, very carefully to avoid waking anyone up. The ship was large, but it held so many passengers that we had to forego formal beds in favor of laying down bedrolls, practically shoulder-to-shoulder. Esmaris Mikov's "estate," after all, had really been more of a city. And that city had housed nearly a thousand slaves — soldiers and servants and maids, horse trainers and farmers, craftsmen and cooks. And dancers, of course. Like I had once been.

Some had chosen to stay in Threll, either to reunite with family members or remain in the Mikov estate, now formally under the leadership of the Orders. But most had come with us, to Ara. A country where they could be free, yes. If only because it was now the country that held my leash.

At the thought, Reshayé slithered through the back of my mind. Even that small movement was enough to make me tense.

I glanced down, looking for a clear path. Serel was snoring softly on one side of me, and even now, more than a week later, when I looked at him I felt a strange pang of disbelief in my chest. Every so often I had to resist the urge to grab him just to make sure he was real.

I had long ago stopped believing in the gods. I already lived my life under the control of so many mortal men — it brought me no comfort to think of immortal ones pulling the strings, too. But if there was anything that had ever felt like divine intervention, it was that my friend was beside me again.

The bedroll on my other side was empty.

I tip-toed over sleeping bodies and crept up creaking wooden stairs. A wall of cold air greeted me on deck, the sky opening up above me like a velvet blanket. I half-stumbled to the rail and leaned over. A blast of wind chilled the sweat on my skin, but my heart was still racing.

It was a dream, I whispered to Reshayé. You are safe. It is not real.

A hiss, caressing my thoughts.

{It is always real. In one way or another. This world or the next. Here, or what lies beneath.} A lungless breath made goosebumps rise on the back of my neck. And I could feel Reshayé's disquiet, its fear, as my eyes lifted over the horizon.

{Something...}

My gaze lingered at the seam between worlds where the sky met the sea. Reshayé's interest pulled there, reaching out into the distance, yearning, searching.

I leaned further over the rail.

I didn't even know what I was looking for. But it was like something was pulling me forward, something that, if I could just get far enough, I would be

able to see—

A hand yanked me away. I stumbled, letting out a small grunt as my back hit a familiar form and a set of arms wrapped around me.

“Too cold for swimming,” a voice murmured, so close to the crest of my ear that goosebumps of an entirely different kind raised on my skin. It was punctuated by an agonizingly brief brush of lips.

Reshay wordlessly slunk to the back of my mind.

“I was not going to fall.”

“I’d rather not risk it. If I recall correctly, you’re not a terrific swimmer.”

“Pssh.” I ran my finger along my captor’s ribs, and just like I knew he would, he let out a poorly-stifled laugh and released me.

I turned to see Max giving me a terse half smile that looked as if it were trying to be annoyed and failing. Left side first, of course.

It was the kind of smile I returned without thinking.

“You abuse the power I’ve entrusted to you by exploiting my weaknesses like that,” he said.

I shrugged. “I cannot be expected to resist all temptations.”

We’d spent a week in constant, agonizing proximity, but had barely touched each other. We had no privacy, after all, for anything more, though I’d never admit aloud the embarrassing amount of time my mind now spent thinking of all the things we’d do once we did.

My ear still throbbed with warmth. I gave him a sly smirk, ready for another retort, but his gaze had turned serious and concerned.

“Nightmares?” he said, quietly.

“They feel very real.”

“They do.”

Of course, Max, of all people, would know.

He extended his hand, and I arched my eyebrows.

“What?”

He scoffed. “Please, Tisaanah.”

There was a part of me that didn’t want to show him — didn’t want to give him yet another thing to worry about, especially not when I knew how

much he was giving up to be here with me. I laid my hand in his, palm up, and together we looked down at it.

The veins of my wrist and forearm, once barely visible beneath the pale patches of my albino skin, had darkened nearly to black.

Max's brow knitted.

"There is already so much about Reshaye that we do not understand," I murmured. "Perhaps this will just be another strange unknown."

"I don't like unknowns."

I almost laughed. *Too bad. Because we're surrounded by them.*

His gaze flicked up to meet mine, and the words died in my throat. His eyes were stark and bright beneath the moonlight. They were the ultimate reminder of what the thing that lurked inside me was capable of. I could still vividly picture those translucent eyelids sliding back, revealing a dark, determined stare, and his body unraveling into flames.

Beautiful. Terrifying.

I looked down at my hand one more time. Then I shrugged and let it drop.

"This should be the least of our concerns, anyway," I said, as I turned my gaze towards the sea. Towards Ara.

I did not know what was waiting for us there. After we left the Mikov estate, for a few blissful days the high of victory drowned out all else. But then the nightmares grew more vivid, and the shores of Ara grew closer, and I felt the Orders' chains tightening.

I had made a deal, after all. The Orders gave me the power I needed to topple the Threllian Lords and save those I left behind. But in exchange, I sold myself back into slavery. Except now, I would wield death, instead of light touches and pretty words.

A knot formed in my stomach at the thought of it. Max's memories of the destruction of Sarlazai still haunted the backs of my eyelids. I would not repeat that kind of devastation.

"I think I have the mental capacity to be equally concerned about all of it, personally," Max muttered, and I placed my hand over his. His fingers

rearranged around mine instinctively, warm and familiar.

“What do you think we will find? When we return?”

He was silent for a long moment. “I think that it doesn’t make sense,” he said, at last. “I think that Nura has been too quiet. I think that Sesri’s reign is a strange battle for the Orders to choose. And I think that they’re desperate, and that’s the thing that scares me most, because I don’t know why. So I don’t know what we’re going to come home to, but I know I don’t like it.”

When we get back, Nura had said to me, *I hope you’re ready to fight like hell.*

I had no choice but to be ready. I was surrounded by reminders of all that depended on me. Eight years ago, my mother had kissed me on the forehead and sent me, her only daughter, into a hideous and uncertain future. It was all so I could have a chance — just one chance at survival, at *living*. And this was my only opportunity to make my life worth all of the ones I had seen snuffed out. There would be no more little girls torn away from their mothers in the night. No more mothers worked to death in the mines.

There was no sacrifice too great for that.

My gaze lifted to Max, to his far off stare. Guilt and affection tangled in my chest, each feeding off the other.

Max had already made so many sacrifices, more than anyone should ever have to suffer.

“I would understand,” I said, quietly.

His eyes flicked to me. “Hm?”

“I would understand if you cannot do this. If you can’t be in another war. I would understand.”

A shadow crossed his face, as if something painful had torn through him, then softened.

“If you can do it, I can do it.” His hand lifted to brush my cheek, then he said, more softly, “I don’t care what we’re walking into. You’re not going to do it alone.”

Gods. My gaze slipped out to the ocean, because suddenly, the sight of him — the sight of the way he looked at me — was too overwhelming. And for

a moment, he made everything feel surmountable.

But then Reshaye's voice unfurled in my mind like a thread of smoke in the darkness.

{He is right,} it whispered. {You are never alone.}

THE NEXT MORNING, I stood with Serel, leaning over the rail of the ship. I had barely gotten back to sleep the night before, but aside from aching eyes I wasn't tired. Instead, I felt like electricity was running through me.

Beside me, Serel lifted his chin and blinked into the salty sea air.

"We're arriving today, right?" he asked.

"The Syrizen say we're close to shore. If it cleared up a bit, maybe we would be able to see the Towers by now."

Serel let out a long, low whistle. "The Towers. What a sight that must be."

"It's really something." There was no denying that. When I first came to Ara, I had been so feverish when I arrived that I barely remembered the journey. The only thing I *did* remember was that sight — the Towers, framed above the imposing Aran cliffs. It had been so magnificent that it made everything inside of me go silent.

And for the first time in weeks, I had felt *hope*.

Reshaye sniffed at the memory and let out a bitter chuckle.

{How foolish you were. How naive.}

"I never thought I would live to see it." An easy smile still clung to Serel's mouth, but his voice dipped a little as he said it, and I knew all the bittersweet depth hidden in that one sentence. A lump rose in my throat.

"You'll love it," I said.

I told myself it was true. It *had* to be true. Serel loved almost everything. He was effortlessly, ceaselessly optimistic. There was no reason why his feelings towards Ara would be any different. But still... there was so much he didn't know. So much that *I* didn't know.

I turned and looked out across the deck. Almost all of the passengers were up here now, which meant that it had become exceptionally crowded. But everyone knew how close we were to arriving, and no one was willing to miss the first glimpse of Ara.

The refugees' emotions were so unguarded compared to those of Arans. Excitement was so thick in the air that it felt like breathing in syrupy mist. And I could taste what lived beneath it, too. Nervousness. Uncertainty. Fear.

My eyes fell to the other end of the boat, where a group of refugees clustered around two figures. One was a young man, Filias, who was a little older than Serel, with cropped dark hair and stubble across his chin. He had large, deep set eyes that were almost always narrowed, assessing the world with inherent suspicion. Beside him was a woman in her fifties, with a calm face and red-and-grey streaked hair — Riasha.

The two of them were inseparable, and they were always surrounded by people. Though both of them had been slaves from Esmaris's estate, I barely knew them. While I had largely been confined to the house, they had lived on the outskirts of Esmaris's land, working the farms. Serel had met Filias a few times, when Filias had been pulled into guard duties. But I hadn't met either of them until they had boarded this ship, and the first thing I had noticed was the way they radiated *determination*.

Most of the people on this boat were here so they could go build a better life for themselves. But Filias and Riasha wanted to build something bigger.

I was fully in support of that, of course. Still, they, especially Filias, regarded me with deep, wary suspicion.

It didn't offend me. It didn't even surprise me.

Surely they had heard the stories of me, and my terrible magic. And while all of us had been slaves to the same master, the people on this ship were otherwise completely different from each other. We all came from disparate fallen nations, some of which had been at war with each other for years before the Threllians swooped in to become the bigger threat. To some, I was a savior. To others, I was a Nyzrenese witch who had sold her soul to some