



We know
books

Fearful

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PROLOGUE

Mara

The dead struggle as though they have something left to live for.

This body is particularly heavy as it sputters at Death's heels. Though, not in the way that dragging a leaden corpse tends to exhaust a human. You see, Death is equipped with everything she needs to damn the dead. When she beckons for strength, it answers. When temptation is required of her, she dons beauty like armor. And when Death needs to live up to her ruthless name, she certainly does.

One would do well to remember this.

No, it is the weight of this man's soul that slows her steps. A darkness swirls around his still heart, coating the cold skin he wears with past sins as slippery as oil beneath Death's touch. Using as few fingers as possible (Death does not like to dirty



her hands), she drags the pleading man by his ankle across the murky swamp. He may be dead in the land of the living, but here, death is a kindness you earn. So his stiff body twists in the mud as he begs for mercy, filling his gaping mouth with inky sludge.

Death does not look back. She already knows what the face of duty looks like. For she is just as damned as the souls she retrieves.

A thick fog creeps across the decaying ground to crowd Death's path and choke the man she drags. Wading through the ominous vapor, Death pauses beneath a rotting tree to draw a deep breath. The stench of this man's stained soul is now mercifully stifled by the sea of fog he drowns beneath. Taking advantage of the peaceful moment, Death peers up at the bare branches clawing their way towards a perpetually gray sky. Gnarled trunks sprout from the muddy ground like bony fingers to point at the life beyond this glorified graveyard.

Unfazed by the eeriness of her birthplace (figuratively speaking, of course), Death weaves between the ashen trees with the thrashing soul in tow. Moss drips from each branch to slither over Death's shoulders and skim across her brow like a slippery veil. Like a runaway bride returned.

The Mors welcome home their own.

Dragging that sputtering soul through the cluster of skeletal trees, Death laughs as she parts a curtain of moss. They do love to gossip – the trees, that is. Or rather, the souls planted within

them. Some hear only the whistling of wind through their branches, but those who know death firsthand will always recognize it in another's voice.

Bones crunch beneath Death's feet as she emerges from the cluster of equally brittle trees. The soul, with his ankle bruising between the delicate fingers of a deceptively alluring woman, cries out as a severed femur nicks his muddy skin (the bones were a bit much, Death could admit). Blood trickles from his forearm to smear the decaying ground, which greedily laps up the life it rarely tastes, bucking towards this soul as if it were an inflated lung. The man screams when the crumbling ground begins to breathe beneath him like the salivating creature it is.

'Not yet.' Death softly scolds the earth's ravenous appetite. Its responding rumble is meek below her feet while the soul at her heels continues its violent thrash. Drawing a long, blackened sword with her free hand, Death uses its soul-stained tip to nudge aside the several bones blocking her path (Death does not like to dirty her boots, either).

At the sight of such a sinister blade, now dripping with an inky vapor, the man screams again. 'Please! Please, let me go! I—!'

'There is no reason to shout.' Death's voice is smooth — perhaps even what one might consider to sound sincere. For the first time since stealing him from the living, she turns to look at the soul she drags. He is fascinatingly forgettable, she thinks as her dark eyes roam over his dull brown hair and muddied

features. But he wears the face of fear, and that, however tedious, is familiar. ‘No one can hear you,’ she finishes simply.

The man blinks up at her in terror. ‘B-but . . . you can hear me . . . ?’

Death allows herself a moment to pity this soul. ‘I am not who you want answering your prayers.’

With that, she turns to continue tugging her captured soul to its doom. The tip of that inky sword hangs from her hand to drag across the dry ground, spitting sparks in her wake. The man sputters from behind, prompting her to say, ‘Don’t mind the bones. I put them here for show.’

‘W-what?’ the man chokes out.

‘Humans have high expectations for death. For as much as everyone dreads it, they spend most of their life pondering the end of it, and just how terrible it will be.’ Licking her lips, Death speaks what she often does – the truth. Death has no patience for decorum, so she finds that most words her tongue forms are frank. ‘I didn’t want to disappoint.’

Mercifully, the man stops his struggling. ‘So the bones . . . aren’t real?’

‘What a silly question.’ There is Death’s charming bluntness. ‘Especially because you already know the answer to it.’

The soul’s cooperation is short-lived.

Sighing through her nose, Death gladly drops the man’s ankle. Ashen trees loom overhead once again, and the soul blinks up at their mossy branches from a spot well-worn into

the decaying earth. Death pulls a handkerchief from her cloak to wipe the grime of a sinful soul from her hands. 'You're free to go.'

The man sits up suddenly. Mud dribbles down his chin like the disbelief tumbling from his mouth. 'I . . . I am?'

'Well, you can lie there if you like.' Death shrugs a shoulder. This, of all things, makes the man flinch beneath her. Such a flippant gesture, as though she's donned the skin of a human that doesn't quite fit right, is chilling on a creature so fearsome. 'You are free to do whatever you like,' she says simply.

'But . . . what am I supposed to do?' the man asks hesitantly.

'Find a way out of the Mors.' Death takes a step back. 'Or don't.'

The soul scrambles to his feet before hurling questions at his captor. 'There is a way out? What am I supposed to look for? Will I get to go back home?'

Death answers to no man. Instead, she leaves him with a promise that most have spent an eternity clinging to. 'You are all alone here. Unless you find a way out.'

Then she turns, banishing the soul to solitude.

Yet he will never truly be alone. Not like she.

Lifting her gaze, Death is met with a sea of swarming souls. Like a writhing blanket, bodies drape every inch of the barren land. Every face is frantic, every soul searching for their freedom. They pass through one another, completely unaware of anything but the loneliness festering within them.

And Death cuts through them all – a scythe cleaving through shadows.

Glancing over a shoulder, she watches her fresh soul search the cracked earth for his escape. His eyes are alight with hope as he rakes through the mud, unaware of the dozens beside him doing the same.

Death looks away, dismayed.

They all dull eventually. Isolation eats at the mind, but still, those unable to accept their fate search for a way out of it. The constant drone of wailing souls is a lullaby Death steps in time to (they often tend to unknowingly harmonize with their sorrow). Weaving between the milling bodies, Death scrutinizes each soul, absently counting off the common ways in which the dead cope.

There is crying, of course. (This is the obvious reaction.) Then there are the souls who stare unseeingly at the dull sky above, having been here long enough to lack the energy to do much else. And finally, there are those who have searched every inch of the Mors for their freedom, only to have lost their sanity.

One soul in particular (Death knows each of her victims, and this woman has haunted the Mors for nearly a millennium) claws at a whispering tree.

‘Let me in! Let me in! I know you’re in there!’

Averting her gaze, Death strides past the howling woman to find refuge beneath a tree of her own. Its whisper is familiar,

the soul within a friend. So Death sits at the tree's gnarled roots and leans her head against the ashy trunk. Shutting her eyes, she tugs on the fraying lifelines each human teeters upon. Death herself does not choose who to knock from their tightrope, only who to catch first once they have fallen.

This is her fate – escorting others to it.

Like an intricate spiderweb, countless lifelines stretch out within Death's mind. She toys with those that begin to fray – a woman nearly trampled by a rogue horse; a little boy contemplating popping a plump, poisonous berry into his mouth; a man with enemies lurking in a shadowed alley. But Death does not waste her time on possible danger or the prospect of demise. No, she searches for a life that is already slipping away; a soul that has lost their balance atop the tightrope.

A man flashes in Death's mind. His golden hair is disheveled above a pair of wild, green eyes. He is arguing, agitated, though his words are muffled.

But that is not what startles Death (little does, you see). It is the familiarity of his features, like a distant memory, that has her stilling.

Stern faces surround him, flashing in Death's mind before she feels this man's lifeline fray irreversibly.

He lifts a vial to his lips and swallows.

Fate sears through a once-strong strand, cutting this young life gruesomely short.

Death gasps. Something in her hollow chest burns.

This demise feels different. Personal. Intimate.

Taken aback, Death furrows her brow as she attempts to deepen her connection to him. Few humans have managed to intrigue her, certainly none that looked like him. Not in this lifetime, at least.

This man willingly tasted death, forfeited his future. And the Keeper of the Mors would like to know why.

She stands to her feet. Shakes her head. Even smiles slightly.

Death swore she would die before setting foot back in Ilya.



CHAPTER 1

Rift

The Plague burns down my throat.
This is what pure power must taste like.

The Healers' protests grow muffled in my ears, mingling
with the shouts of every encircling Scholar.

I watch as a wave of disbelief crashes over their blurry faces.

I ordered that they bring me this perfected dose.

Now it is they who must keep me alive.

Foolish, reckless, mad – I don't care.

I have great plans for Ilya.

I only need to evade Death.

