

TO DREAM
IN
DARKNESS



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PROLOGUE

Contrary to what those pesky mortals might believe, the Death God does not enjoy killing.

He does not even kill, really. Such violence is beneath him. He is the breeze that floats in through an opened lattice window, the gray smoke rising from a burned incense stick, the blood seeping from a fresh-made wound. He only appears when the last breath has already been drawn and the skin has already gone cold.

At least, that is how it has always been.

The truth is much less dramatic than the silly tales they tell at teahouses in the Mortal Realm about him arriving with a sword in his hand and murder on his mind. He had stayed once to listen out of morbid, misplaced curiosity, and while he hadn't expected much in the first place, he still found himself scoffing at what he heard:

"He has horns and fangs and claws that can cut the body into clean halves." He is not an *animal*.

"He will slaughter the husband first and seduce the wife second." Mortal flesh holds as much temptation to him as the carcass of a lamb.

"He spends every waking minute planning out the most painful death possible for his next victim." Perhaps, given their nature to make everything about themselves, the mortals would be disappointed to find that he barely thinks of them at all. That as he drifts through the crooked streets and alleys, passes from house to lantern-lit house, collecting the souls with weary expertise, he is most concerned about returning to the Night Realm as early as possible.

So it's something of a relief to be stepping back through the enchanted doors, into the dim, empty halls of his palace. He

brushes the dust from his sleeves, though the scent of mortal fruit and fire clings to him. He forces himself to tolerate it; he is almost done now. His robes trail behind him, whispering against the smooth, polished stone, and the souls float a little farther behind, glowing softly, just as white as the eternal snow falling outside. Just as silent.

More sets of heavy doors heave open on their own when he approaches until at last, he finds himself standing before the gates to the Yellow Springs. The final destination for the souls and his final destination for the night.

He lifts a hand. For a moment, nothing happens—as expected. These gates are ancient, after all, hundreds of centuries older than he is, used by the Death God appointed before him and the Death God before that. He would not be surprised if they had been created at the very beginning of the Three Realms, the images of the dragons and lilies carved deep into the wood by the first immortal.

Then the gates rumble. The dragons uncoil and slither to the sides as if alive, and he is greeted by a darkness so complete that the surrounding obsidian walls seem bright by comparison. That even he, dressed from head to toe in pure black, stands out against it. It is a darkness that stretches on and on, without shape, without edges. As a child, he had been terrified that he would enter and be swallowed whole by it. Simply step in and disappear.

But he has not been a child in eons.

He keeps walking, chin up, shoulders straight, the souls gathering closer around him, illuminating the way. There is a faint humming sound building in the background, like a thousand voices conversing quietly in a faraway room, and soon it merges with the rushing of water. He can taste the water on his tongue, the unpleasant blend of salt and ash and copper. He can feel it, too, the shock of plunging into those frozen depths, of sinking farther and farther as the darkness pours in over his head, the voices sharpening into screams, sobs, pleas . . .

The ever-present throbbing in his skull intensifies. He squeezes his eyes shut. Presses two fingers to his temple, as if he can physically drive out the pain.

Useless.

He does not know if he means himself, or the curse, or the hundreds of so-called cures that have promised everything and solved nothing.

But never mind that. He has a job to complete first; he will be free to suffer afterward.

The souls begin to quiver, their pale light glossing the Yellow Spring's surface. Some seem to know the path forward and are eager to let themselves be swept away by the currents, into the next cycle of the afterlife. Others grow restless, flitting left and right like fireflies. These ones he guides downstream with his own hands.

When the very last soul has left the shore, he rises and turns to go, but a ripple in the air catches his eye.

The Death God frowns.

This is unusual, but not entirely unseen before. Most deaths are natural, inconsequential, no more worthy of attention than the dropping of flies. But some deaths are written out in the constellations in such a way that if they do not come to pass, the balance of the universe is disrupted. Like rocks to pebbles, these souls tend to weigh heavier, to cast stronger waves when they fall. So as the ripple expands outward, forming a mirage, he anticipates the death of an ancient god, perhaps one of the higher-ranked officials from the Celestial Realm.

Yet instead of shining gold pillars, red-crowned cranes, and dusk-painted clouds swirling around the steps to the Celestial Emperor's throne, he is shown a vision of the sea.

The sea, a lone cottage on a floating island, and a god.

She is gathering herbs from the back garden, her long hair spilling over her shoulder as she plucks a peony and holds it up to the brilliant daylight, her robes the same blue and white as the foaming

waves below her. He has never met a god from the Celestial Realm who could be described as *kind* before, yet there is something undeniably kind about her features. The harmony of her long lashes with her soft lips. The care with which she touches the petals.

Then the vision changes. The sea vanishes. The cottage disintegrates. Only the god remains, but she is crumpled on the floor, a crimson puddle spreading rapidly around her. A sword twisted deep into her chest while she lies there, mouth opening and closing, her face contorted in pain.

And he sees himself in the mirage, his hand around the weapon, his fingers stained red.

His frown deepens. His next breath comes out too fast, too sharp.

He is almost tempted to think it a mistake, except the Heavens are never wrong, never to be defied. He can feel the will of the Heavens pressing into his mind like a blade into flesh. This is the fate designed for the kind-faced god who picks flowers and lives on the sea, and he is the one who must see it through. It is insulting to know that he will be acting exactly as the mortals imagine him, that he will no longer be able to correct them when they say his hands are tainted. How uninspired. How inconvenient. And how deeply ironic.

The Death God does not enjoy killing. He has never killed at all—

Until now, that is.

PART ONE

THE DEATH GOD
IS SICK OF FLOWERS



CHAPTER ONE

The other gods only come to me when they're dying. Or when they *believe* themselves to be dying, which is often a different matter. For divine beings who can command the seas and call upon thunder, travel miles within seconds and summon weapons with only a flick of the wrist, they can be startled quite easily. It is a strange side effect of the power that runs through our veins: It distorts the senses and amplifies everything, turning the most offhand remark into a grievous insult, the slightest threat into a fatal blow.

In only the past decade, I have tended to scratches so shallow they had all but healed on their own by the time the god showed up to my cottage, weeping and whimpering; a case of purple lips that turned out to be cherry juice stains; and a mild cough that was instantly resolved with a few sips of dew.

But when the door bursts open, I can tell it is different this time. I drop the peony I'm holding and shoot to my feet, taking in the two gods outside.

"Help him," Hanchen demands. He's panting, shaking beneath the weight of the other god, Yuemo, whose entire body is slumped against his. At first I almost do not recognize them. Every time I've seen them since our schooling years together, Hanchen is always laughing loudly at his own jest, his bright eyes curved into crescents, as charming as you would expect a god of fame to be. Yuemo, meanwhile, is always silent and stony-faced, as difficult to read as the dreams he controls. Yet now, it is Hanchen who is

entirely serious, the space between his brows drawn with worry, and Yuemo who sends me a feeble smile.

My gaze moves downward, and my stomach tightens. It is difficult to see clearly with his blood-matted robes in the way, but the shape of the shadows and the odd angle at which Yuemo is leaning to the side reveals enough.

The flesh on his left calf has been carved off, exposing the white glisten of bone.

"Manners," Yuemo murmurs. "Don't be—so rude."

Hanchen shoots him an incredulous, half-wild look. "You cannot seriously be fixated on proper etiquette right now—"

"Hanchen."

"Fine." Hanchen grits his jaw and dips his head in my direction. "Please. Please, help him—"

"Come inside," I tell them. My heart thuds against my ribs as I cross the small space to lead them in, my arm coming around Yuemo's other side to support him. I feel him sway before I lower him slowly to the single bed in the center of the cottage, letting him recline against the curved oak frame. "Lie down first. Now let me see—and don't be scared."

"I'm not scared," Yuemo croaks out.

"I was talking to Hanchen," I clarify, glancing over at the other god. Even in the warm afternoon light, his face is pale and fragile as the cracked porcelain bowl on my nightstand, his forehead beaded with sweat. "Everything will be fine."

I am almost impressed by how steady my voice comes out, how clear and confident, betraying none of the nerves plucking at my gut. *There is no room for fear, only focus*, I remind myself. An old motto from my days as a young god, a time spent sheltered in gilded classrooms, buried in scrolls and instructions, competing with the other hungry, inexperienced students to prove that I could be the best healer of them all.

Only focus.

Very carefully, I unroll Yuemo's robes, pushing them up to the knee.

A tight breath of pain leaves his lips.

"Sorry," I say, crouching to inspect the damage up close. Surprise runs through me, with horror on its heels. It is a clean cut, right against the bone—any deeper or faster and the entire lower leg would have been cut off. It's *too* clean. Not an accident at all.

I swallow my questions for later.

"How severe is it?" Hanchen whispers. "Can you—can you heal him?"

"I will try," I reassure them both. "Give me a moment."

Without another word, I spring up and hurry out through the sliding back door, into the garden. It is only a small patch of earth above the sea, stretching around the balcony, but it has everything I need: ripe longevity peaches and red berries bursting with honey, stalks of fresh lemongrass and azaleas and blooms of spirit-quieting chamomile. When I breathe in, the scent of seawater and the fragrance of flowers wash away the foul blood stench. I find what I am looking for easily. The lotuses rise from the pond, standing straight in the breeze, their petals clean and wax white despite the mud they're planted in. I plunge my whole arm into the freezing water and feel for the sturdiest root, my movements quick, steady.

The long sleeves of my robes drip water in a trail over the floor when I return, the lotus root held firm in my hand.

Hanchen's eyes widen. "Is that—"

"For his leg," I confirm. I lower myself until I am at eye level with Yuemo. His breathing is shallow, his dark hair damp. I can see the green-blue veins branching out over his neck like poisonous weeds, the shudder of each pulse. "I won't lie to you: This will be extremely painful. In order for the lotus to attach itself to your shin, the wound must be opened farther before closing. But you must hold *very* still, or else your body may reject it and self-destruct."

"Self-destruct," Hanchen repeats under his breath, his fists clenching over the pillow where Yuemo lays his head. He sounds like he is choking on the words.

"Just do it," Yuemo says to me, so quiet I have to crane my neck to hear him. "I won't move."

I do not hesitate. I cannot hesitate at a time like this. I guide the lotus root up until it is positioned perfectly below his knee, until plant and bone are touching. It looks absurd. Impossible. I sense their simmering doubts, see the questioning glance that passes between them, but I shut it out. I shut the entire world out, the hushed lapping of waves outside, the silver tinkling of wind chimes, the sunlight pressed like a palm against my closed eyelids, then call upon my power.

Every god's power comes from a different source within them. For some, it is rage: They need only imagine the last time they were wronged, a gross betrayal, another god whose face they would most dearly like to punch, and their blood will fill with lightning, and their energy will blaze through them in a brilliant, violent wave. For some, it is gentler, like nostalgia. They can recall any happy memory from their childhood, the sweetness of a peeled persimmon, the delight of watching a wooden horse gallop around the celestial courtyards, the freedom of flying on the pearl-scaled back of a dragon, the embrace of their mother upon coming home. There are even those who dream of something as frivolous as love: cups of plum blossom wine set out on a table; a gentle hand brushing a stray petal from their hair; waking from a nightmare and finding instant comfort, arms to hold them, a voice to ground them.

But I am too exhausted for anger, and I have been left alone for so long that the very idea of company feels like an absurd luxury.

When I want power, what I dream of is power itself.

Cold, breathtaking, incinerating power. The only thing you can count on across the Three Realms. It is all I've ever wanted, ever since my parents were driven down to the Mortal Realm as

punishment. They deserved it, the other gods like to remind me. My parents had always been lesser gods, mere shadows beneath the sun of the Celestial Emperor, and they had made the unforgivable mistake of trying to warn the mortals of a coming earthquake. None of the mortals had listened to them, of course; when my parents appeared in their villages, frantic and begging for them to leave, they were dismissed as drunk or possessed or simply having lost their minds. But even though they'd failed, the crime lay with the simple fact that they had tried. They had risked meddling with hundreds of thousands of mortal fates, ruining the plans already laid out by the Heavens.

When I close my eyes, I can recall the very last time I saw their faces. How their divinity had faded like the moon at dawn, how they had fallen into the vortex, their hands bound, their bodies to be swallowed and spat back out into mortal forms. How my mother's bleak eyes had found mine in those final moments, her mouth forming the silent shape of a wish: *Make us proud.*

I swore that I would. I would have everything they'd been denied: recognition for my talents, reverence and respect, a proper title. I would make myself useful, even if that meant being used, no matter what I had to give up first. And I gave up decades upon decades, refusing joy when it was offered to me, declining to join in on drunken trips to the peach blossom forests so I could work on my healing techniques, swallowing my pride when I was sent away from the main palace to an isolated little cottage, where the gods could come and go as they pleased but where I've remained. Another punishment for the lowly daughter of exiles.

The words spin through my mind like a spell: *I will remake myself. I will rise from all this. Take power by the cup and drink it. I will become the Celestial Healer, and my brilliance will be such that it will obliterate the past and blaze forth into the future.*

Now, my divinity flows through my extended wrists and out through my palms in a fierce, building rush. The first burst of