

A *Powerless* story

Fearful

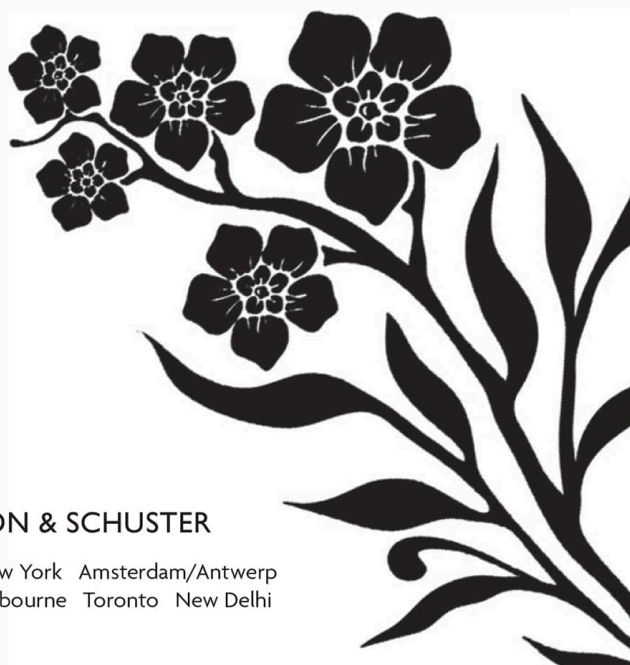


NO.1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *POWERLESS*
LAUREN ROBERTS



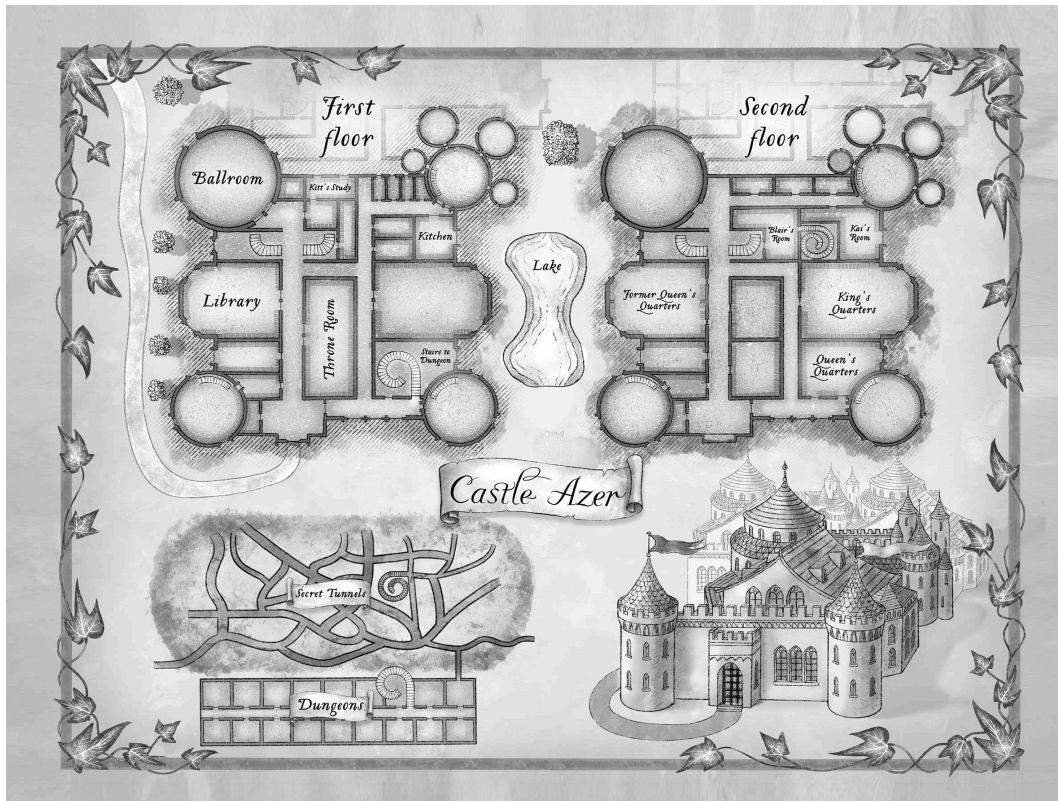
Fearful

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Description 1

*To those fearful of falling—in love or otherwise—
you are braver than you know*



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 toward 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 toward 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 muddled 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

Kitt

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.



CHAPTER 2

Mara

Life is much duller than it was when Death once possessed it.

This saddens her slightly. She was hoping to be impressed by mankind.

Alas, with a disapproving drawing of breath (it tastes of smoke and the decaying leaves crunching beneath her boots), Death follows the scent of a soul eager to meet her. Her lungs have no need for air, but some habits—a body reflexively drawing breath, desperate to provide its host with life—die hard. You see, Death takes it upon herself to appreciate the things humans fail to, and breathing is certainly a thankless phenomenon.

So, with damp air filling useless organs, Death strolls across the castle grounds with all the confidence of a royal.

There is a distant familiarity here, no matter the blandness that has now blanketed this kingdom. The trees are gnarled, bowing beneath the unforgivable hand of Time. Even the sky hanging above seems bleached of its usual vibrance as Death drags her fingers along the castle's chalky stones.

Yes, much duller than she remembers.

Guards pass in a lazy procession, ignorant to Death's watchful gaze. She doesn't mind their lack of recognition—or anyone else's, for that matter. In fact, she has grown to enjoy the quiet pocket from which she observes the living. Death is a demanding role, as one can imagine, but she finds the trivial troubles of mankind to be a delightful distraction.

A human fussing over a blemish on their skin. One begrudgingly eating a bowl of oats they believe is beneath them. Another arguing with their lover over a quite obvious misunderstanding.

Apparently, these are the things worth living for. And Death finds that most amusing. Her favorite pastime—between gathering souls and acquainting them with a maddening solitude—consists of what most would wrongly identify as spying. No, her acute observation is a manifestation of curiosity. Research to aid in her occupation. A passion for the mundane (humans) and the tragic (their tedious lives).

You see, Death is much more than her namesake. She is a lady, after all (that fact alone should be interesting enough). Can she not have hobbies?

Death takes her time roaming the countless castle corridors. She is in no rush—not like the living. Besides, there is hardly anything new to explore. Time has left this piece of the past perfectly intact. It's quite haunting, but not in the way Death can usually appreciate. You see, she does not enjoy having a tangible reminder of her greatest mistake.

Nestling into the folds of her cloak, Death weaves between the puddles of sunlight soaking the plush floor. That tugging in her chest grows stronger with each step, and she eagerly carves a path toward the soul at this tether's end. Because in all of Death's years, she has never known an Azer to so willingly part with their power.

Dying is hardly something kings do gracefully. For that very reason, Death so enjoys her time spent with royals. Even when looking up at her from the Mors' muddy floor, they still unflinchingly command. It's intriguing, watching a powerful human slowly recognize what they have become—nothing more than a stranded soul caught in Fate's web.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, you do know that this is still insane?”

This polite disbelief drifts from the dim room that summons Death. The soul within calls to her, fraying beneath the weight of some irreparable decision. Her tie to this human runs deep, as though their veins are knotted together, hearts humming the same tune. Though the organ is long cold in Death's unmoving chest, it recognizes itself in the one that pumps borrowed time, mere steps away.

This soul is foolish enough to hope.

And a lifetime ago, so was Death.

“I’m aware,” responds a different male voice, this one far smoother. He doesn’t sound like a man who wants to die. “But it needs to be done. Can I count on you?”

Death pauses in the hallway, awaiting her entrance and the confrontation of her curiosity. There is hardly any need to startle the dying soul in front of another. She is not a monster, after all. Her connection to this man allows physical contact, the ability to behold. But Death is unused to being seen by the somewhat living. This oddity will be a first for the both of them.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” It’s the first voice. Death notes that it sounds like he is accustomed to curving each sentence into something comedic, as though he can hardly take himself seriously. “You can count on me. I only hope I, uh, live to tell the tale.”

This comment, combined with that incessant curiosity, has Death stretching a strand of her power toward the man. His soul is not marked for the Mors. In fact, she can see his sprawling lifeline clearly—it is long and happier than most.

Death sighs. For the umpteenth time over the decades, she marvels at the self-importance of humans. Every soul believes they are worthy of being stalked by Death. But you see, she is a busy woman. One who doesn’t waste her time on a man’s paranoia of her possible presence.

If you wish to grab Death’s attention, then die.

“Let’s hope Blair’s on her best behavior.” It’s that steady voice again. “I’ll be here if you need anything.”

There is a rustling of fabric before a shadow curls across the carpet. A man, dressed in a blinding ensemble of white, halts in the doorframe. His masked face turns back toward the king. “Not that it matters coming from me, but I think it’s really great what you’re doing for the kingdom. And Calum is a good man—I hope to help you both in any way I can.”

How sincere, Death thinks. Though, she sees no point in speaking otherwise.

Death appreciates—expects, really—words that carry weight behind them. The kind capable of welling eyes and softening even the stoniest of hearts.

It's one of the few things humans do right—feeling.

“Thank you, Lenny,” the king returns softly. Death thinks he sounds hesitant. She thinks a lot of things, most of them all at once but never portrayed on her placid features. She carries herself with a stoic sort of practiced professionalism.

Death is quite attentive for someone her age.

This *Lenny* strolls into the hallway with a fading smile. Though, he looks rather anxious—an expression that is likely foreign on his freckled face. Death eyes him closely, tracing the coils of red hair that bounce with each of his lanky strides. So when his head suddenly swivels in her direction, she is startled half to death (as the living like to say, though it's a gross exaggeration used without her consent).

Unsurety creases Lenny's brow. Then his warm eyes collide with Death's frigid gaze.

She is pinned to the wall like a carcass on display. After living (proverbially, of course) in the shadows for decades, unseen and unburdened by identity, she is suddenly beheld. This boy who smells of starch—a point Death feels cannot go unnoticed—is the first to acknowledge her presence.

She is not sure what to make of this.

Peering beyond this physical realm, she studies his soul. It is like drawing back a curtain to find the next layer of one's being behind. And this soul is bright—glowing with a yellow sheen. Death predicted as much.

Lenny looks away, shaking his head. “Shit,” he mumbles. “I really am paranoid.”

With that declaration of defeat, he sets off down the hall once again.

Death stares longingly at his retreating form. Then at the wall separating her from that flickering, blue soul within the study.

Her foot taps a steady beat against the floor. On occasion, she pretends the rhythm belongs to her heart. It provides some semblance of comfort, though she doesn't care to question why.

After much deliberation, Death follows the lingering scent of starch through the castle. She warrants this diversion because no living being has

ever sensed her presence.

The mystery of this starchy man is worth Death's valuable time. Besides, the king will still be dying when she returns.

Death is rather blunt. Sensitivity is hardly in her job description.

The guard leads her out into the training yard, where his white attire only further blinds in the streaming sunlight. He treads carefully toward a young woman who hogs the little shade offered by a generous tree. She is sprawled atop the soft grass, strands of striking lilac hair clinging to her slick brow.

It looks as though she has been exercising. What an unappealing use of life.

The woman frowns at the swelling sound of rustling fabric. Then she scowls when the man beneath it speaks.

"Wow, you're actually sweating. Maybe you are human."

Death finds this introduction fascinating. Perhaps she can collect some enticing gossip to share with the trees back home.

The young lady's eyes fly open. Then she promptly sweeps her scrutiny over him. "All that starch much be getting to your head. I don't think you know who you're talking to."

(Death feels strangely validated by her acknowledgment of such an excessive scent. Moments like these make her grateful for the ability to cease breathing.)

That is all the woman deigns to say before settling back into the bed of grass and letting her eyes drift closed. She seems to bask in the quiet stillness, lacing fingers over her abdomen in contentment.

"So, uh, still here."

Death watches as the woman lifts herself into a sitting position, huffing all the while. "Did I not imply that you should be walking away right now?" Her voice is impressively condescending.

"Trust me"—Lenny lifts his hands in mock surrender—"I would. But unfortunately for the both of us, I can't."

"Here." That alluring hair hardly softens this woman's sharp features. Her smile is mocking. "Allow me to help."

The guard's boots leave the ground suddenly, and he practically squeals. "The king! I'm here on behalf of the king!"

So this is the Blair who has men fearing for their lives. She is powerful—that much is obvious. But like every other Elite, she has done nothing to deserve this strength. It is borrowed. Stolen.

Death takes a seat on the grass, preparing for the show. Though, to her dismay, it doesn't last long. The Tele—Death so enjoys these silly titles—stands to her feet before setting the guard on his own. Now reunited with the ground, Lenny runs a gloved hand down his face and fights to find his composure.

There is not an ounce of disdain withheld from Blair's expression. "You were a foot off the ground." A slow blink. "If that."

"Yes, and I was overcome with empathy for those taller than me," Lenny muses.

Both Death and Blair simply stare at him, thoroughly unimpressed.

He blinks those brown eyes behind that mask, the same ones that unknowingly met Death's. Flatly, he adds, "I'm joking."

"Right. Now would you like me to explain why I didn't laugh?"

"Let me guess." The guard's voice is falsely cheerful. "You don't know how?"

Death's gaze flicks between them.

"No, because laughter typically accompanies something that is *funny*," Blair retorts with a well-practiced pout.

Lenny sighs in defeat. "All right, let's just get this over with." He claps his gloved hands together, as if to brace himself against the words leaving his lips. "Paedyn is back."

Blair swallows swiftly. Very watchful, Death. "And? Why would I care that the traitor has been caught?"

"Because the king has plans for her. Plans that keep her alive to help Ilya."

"Again," the temperamental Tele bites out, "why does this concern me?"

Impulsively, the guard pulls that mask from his face to display an additional dozen freckles. His nose is straight. Jaw strong. Eyes earnest.

Death recognizes his need for Blair to see the emotion etched into his features. He is desperate to bridge an honest connection between them.

How very human.

Blair takes a wary step back. Death, disconcerted, feels the urge to do the same.

She can appreciate a baring of one's emotions, an outright invitation for connection. But Death has earned the right to numbness. She wishes not for unsolicited feelings and the repercussions of them. So, sitting this close to such sentiment makes her tense.

"You know what Paedyn will try to do to you," Lenny murmurs.

"Yes." Brown eyes roll behind several strands of lilac hair. "The key word there is 'try.'"

Death is thoroughly enthralled. The afterlife is hardly this dramatic.

"Paedyn won't stop." There is an urgency in the guard's gaze. "Especially if you are sharing the same castle. And the king needs to keep you safe."

"The Slummer is a traitor," Blair spits. It's been a lifetime since Death has heard that insult. "Why would she be living lavishly in the castle with—?"

"You will find out soon enough," Lenny interrupts before swallowing thickly. "All you need to know now is that I... I am to be your personal guard. To protect you from Paedyn."

A moment of stifling silence passes between them.

Then, a startling cackle bellows from Blair. "Now that..." She snorts. "*That* was a joke."

The guard lets out a weak, uncomfortable laugh. "Oh, you are really not going to find this funny when you realize I'm serious."

Death considers cracking a smile at such captivating entertainment. She does not, of course. Those are saved for special occasions.

Blair takes a slow step forward, her voice drenched in ice. "You? Protect me? From Paedyn Gray?"

"Whoa." Lenny lifts his hands again. "Let's not... throw the messenger through the air with your mind, okay? I'm just doing as I'm told."