

# I TO THE PAIN

Slowly, painfully, I began to regain consciousness. I was naked. I knew that instinctively. The only thing I could feel was pain fighting a desperate battle with the freezing cold, and the boom of my heart, weak but insistent, thundering away in my chest. Something had woken me. I could have slept for hours, could have tumbled wearily down the soft slope of hypothermia into delicious nothingness. Some outside force had pulled me back. I groaned as I felt that promise of oblivion slipping away.

"Hello?" he said, his tone uncertain.

His smooth male voice ripped through the silence, snapping the reaper's lusty fingers from my face too abruptly to tolerate. I screamed through blood-stained hands and dimly wondered why I was so afraid. The smell of my own fear intermingled with that of the rotting leaves I lay shivering beneath in a fetid bouquet.

Agony pulsed through every dimension of my existence now that I was truly awake. I needed to see who was out there and tried to open my eyes, but they wouldn't cooperate. The lashes were fused together somehow, and no amount of effort would part them. Bits and pieces of the last few hours came rushing back to memory as the blasted owl hooted in the distance.

"Here, have my cloak," he said in a cultured English accent.

A blanket of warmth swept over me and I felt long fingers tucking it in. The heat of his body remained in the thick wool and the contrast of that warmth against my stone-cold skin made me break into a grand mal fit of shivers. I straightened out of the fetal position intending to rise, but it hurt, so I stopped. Tears welled up in response to the pain and began to soften the crust around my eyelids. Finally the lashes unglued, and I peeked through my fingers to find a tall, lean man with immense concern on his angular features crouching down beside me.

"My lady, are you alright?" he asked.

"No. Do I look alright?" I said through chattering teeth. The sound of the owl hooting again made me jump, pan-flashing fire through every nerve ending. I sat up quickly in reflex and felt myself break like an ice sculpture moved too quickly. The pain was so unendurable I nearly vomited on the man's boots.

"Is there something I can do to help?" he asked, oddly eager to accept this gruesome duty. His pointed face looked up, startled, when the owl hooted again nearby.

I looked over at the empty bucket I'd taken with me from the water, wishing for even the sulfur-and-death liquid that had filled it. My tongue was swollen and glued to the roof of my mouth and my stomach rumbled with a hollow moan.

"Do you have any food or water?" I clutched the warm fabric to myself, hiding my nakedness. Not that it mattered, I knew I looked like an animated corpse.

He sighed and rubbed his hands through dark blonde hair. "No, I'm sorry," he said, "but I do have some wine."

"I'll take it," I croaked. My stomach tied itself in a knot at the mention, and I drained the wooden flask he handed me in three gulps. It was warming as it pooled in my belly, easing me somewhat.

"You're hurt," he said.

"Figured that out did you? Where the hell am I?"

He took back the empty flask and looked me over, observing my swollen, battered face and the four inch long slit across the top of my throat. "The Eastern Lands," he said. "Where did you come from? What's your name?"

Those basic questions shouldn't have come as such a shock, but panic gripped me like a Kraken as I realized I didn't have the answers. "... I don't know." I swallowed hard, forcing back the bile-tinged wine that crept up my gullet. "I can't remember anything. I woke up... like this."

"Right. Come on, then," he said. "I have a warm house and food just a short way from here, if you think you can make it."

I smiled and tasted blood. "Yes." It was a struggle to stand while holding the cloak tightly around me. "Thank you."

An extraordinarily charming smile transformed his features from pointy and flat-lipped to handsome in an instant. He offered his hand to help me up and the warmth of his touch was enough to dispel the urge to flinch. I heard the owl again. It had followed me from the well, perhaps hoping I'd suddenly morph into a tiny rodent, or maybe just biding his time.

As I rose I felt a stab in my side that stopped me short. My ribs must be broken. The man held his hand out to help me. I felt the warmth of his fingertips brush my arm.

"Don't touch me," I snapped. I was just as shocked as he was by my violent outburst.

He pulled his hand back but remained where he was. I didn't want to feel a man's hands on me. Not just yet. Movement caused a hundred scabbed slices in my skin to break open and bleed. I could just see them in the dim, a vibrant red against skin turned yellow by the evening sun. Finally I stood and took a tentative step with the stiff-legged gait of a mummy.

I stumbled and fell, but he caught me before I struck the earth.

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling back again.

"No, no, it's alright. Thank you."

It hadn't been so bad. His touch wasn't fueled by lust or hate. He only wanted to help. I decided to let him.

He wrapped his arm around me for support and we began to walk along a well-worn path. I glanced up at his face in profile and was startled to see that the tip of his ear formed a point. I brought a hand up to examine my own ear and felt a gentle curve, scabbed on newly perforated edges. I gritted my teeth. Even my ears were bloody.

My rescuer was almost a foot taller than I was, but even with the disparity in height he made a useful crutch. He had a prominent nose but not too large for his face. The corners of his mouth were turned downward, his gaze concentrating on the path ahead. His hair wasn't long, falling only to the middle of his neck in tumbled curls.

I stumbled suddenly, my bare toes smashing against a stone. "Damn it!" I yelled.

He released me as I hopped in a circle like a one-legged frog. When the throbbing eased I stood wobbling, unsteady on my pins. He reached out to stabilize me, smiling kindly, and I took a hasty step back out of reflex. His smile broke but the hand remained outstretched. I gathered my remaining courage – what little was left. I wanted to run and hide from everyone, but the lure of food and drink was strong. I took a hesitant step toward him and he resumed leading me gently down the path.

"Who did this to you?" he asked.

"I don't know." I pointed in the direction I'd come and tried not to move my lips too much. "I woke up next to some water in a forest back west before dawn. I walked for hours toward the sun and then I buried myself in the leaves to die."

He stopped, moving to face me with eyes that met mine and grew large. His hands gripped my shoulders and he asked, "What water? What did it look like?"

"I don't know," I answered, taken aback by this sudden intensity. I jerked away from his grasp. "It had terrible tasting water in it. I can't tell you much more. I left there as soon as I could move. The forest was creepy, all dead-limbed and skeletal. This forest looks different," I said, gathering the cloak that had fallen open slightly allowing the crisp wind to claw at my nether regions. It was bitterly cold. I felt like I wasn't used to it, but had no basis for the feeling.

He was looking up into the darkening sky, trying to deduce what hole I crawled out of. "You mean, the Dead Spring?" he asked, returning his gaze to mine, his eyes still wide with something like fear. "You came from the Dead Spring?"

"How should I know? If the water there tastes like death, then yes."

He shivered.

"I was a dead woman, anyway. Only that blasted owl kept me company. Where am I?"

He looked puzzled. "As I said before, you're in the Eastern Lands."

"The Eastern Lands," I repeated, my eyebrows furrowing painfully. A drop of blood slid down my nose, released by the tiny movement. "Ok, but what country? England maybe?"

He sighed, smiled faintly with a sideways glance, and put his arm back around me. I flinched again, but he ignored it. "Let's just get you to a fire."

A shiver ran through me, from his touch or the cold I couldn't tell. "Agreed."

We walked onward with the sunset painting the sky like fire behind us, casting a faint glow over everything. The trees were lively here, colored with the palette of autumn, waving merrily in the breeze. Everything was washed in gold and flame. He held me upright, catching me when I stumbled but leaving me in friendly silence. I was relieved to find that the whole land wasn't like the dark woods I'd first woken in. A thought occurred to me, one I didn't want to ask but felt I must.

"Am I dead?"

He looked down at me and seemed to consider the question instead of throwing it out of hand. "I don't think so, no."

"Damn."

He shivered visibly again, muttering what sounded like a prayer under his breath. The grip around me didn't loosen but I felt him pull away somehow. It was as if he was afraid to touch me. Could I blame him?

I had woken up in the moonless dark in the icy early morning hours, the smell of blood thick around me. I'd lain there playing dead lest my attackers strike again. I didn't remember being attacked, not exactly, but the evidence was screaming from every slash and broken rib.

As I lay there in the dark, flashes of memory came back to me. It was like standing on train tracks staring at the oncoming engine as the whistle blows its final warning, just waiting for the impact.

I had been in a stone room with dozens of black-robed figures surrounding me. My hands were tied to a post; leaning on it was my only hope of remaining upright. I heard the crack of a brutal whip striking my back. I could feel every stroke as it tore furrows through my flesh, the sound of it smacking sharply, releasing the metallic scent of blood. The robed people were cheering, hissing. Some were dancing with delight. I felt an overwhelming sense of evil. Something ancient and deadly with sulfurous breath was hovering above me, but I couldn't bring myself to look at it.

A man stood in front of me, I could just see him through the haze of tears, vaguely familiar. He was in a white robe like a priest, holding a delicate crystal bowl in his left hand and a chiseled stone knife in his right. He chanted something sinister and swept the knife viciously across my throat letting the blood spray into the bowl. There was a lot of blood but I realized mutedly that they had not severed an artery or I'd be dead already. My head felt light and dizzy and I began to lose consciousness, struggling against it. I had to try and fight but was too weak to do so.

The entity above me felt as if it was getting stronger as I was dying, as if I was inexplicably connected to it. When the last person had drained the bowl of my life force and shattered it on the stone floor, they all began chanting together, the sound deeply malicious. They moved closer, hissing and clawing.

Some sliced me with their fingernails, some with knives. I screamed but the noise escaped as only a whimper. The priest came and untied my hands; the release of the tourniquet-like ligature a small and welcome mercy. I crumpled to the floor. They began to beat me, kicking my face and ribs until I thought each shallow breath would be my last. I wanted to die, wanted it all to be over. I prayed silently for God to save me or kill me – just make it stop.

They eventually exhausted themselves, backing away. I uncurled from the fetal position and rolled sideways, lying on my back, staring into the red eyes of the demon hovering near the ceiling. It laughed like the sound of grinding boulders. I hadn't thought it was possible to be even more afraid.

I was seized, carried a few paces, and thrown into freezing cold water. They held me under but they needn't have bothered. I let myself sink down into oblivion. Death was welcome to take me, an answer to prayer. I'd seen a light then, a speck of blue that twinkled like a tiny star in the darkness that began to move in circles, swirling around me.

Breath entered my constricted lungs and water fell away from my tender skin. Rolling over a ledge of some sort I felt the impact of my body hitting earth. I could smell grass now as well as blood... and fear. When the first rays of dawn had spilled down around me, I'd risen. I'd taken only the briefest look at my reflection in the water, and even that tiny glimpse had shown me that I was grotesque.

Shaking my head now to clear my longing for death and my rescuer's reaction to it, I did an inventory of my brain to find it swept clean and dusted. My head was completely empty, no clues to be found. I had no name, no history, no hope. I couldn't remember anything else. I had just rolled over the stones around the water and plopped on the frosted grass looking like this. Why? What the hell was going on?

I felt like a leaf on a breeze, thrown from the tree and falling, spiraling down into the unknown. My head was dizzy from the trauma of it. There was no strength left in me to fight. No will left even to live. If I had ever taken my identity for granted before, I never would again.

The fading warmth of the wine went suddenly cold in the pit of my stomach. I bit my lower lip in frustration, shocked by the pain it caused. My teeth had been kicked through my mouth, apparently. I searched with my tongue and found the tooth-sized slits present on both lips. The lingering tannins on the wounds caused my vision to waver and my foot to slip out from under me. I fell but the man caught me, drawing me back up and pressing on, saying nothing. My energy was running out. He was carrying most of my weight now.

*Ok, just try to be logical,* I thought. I'd woken there but now I was here. I'd walked with the bucket of nasty water toward the dawn hoping it would be warmer that way. The forest had been dead, spindly black trees moaning in the wind. By midafternoon the bucket was nearly empty. My stomach was eating itself and I just wanted to die. I'd taken the last swallow and looked around for a place to bid life farewell.

With the slow movements of a windup toy nearing the end of its potential I had gathered a pile of long-dead fallen leaves and curled into them, burrowing down like an armadillo. I'd been surprised by how comfortable it was and how the layer I'd heaped over me actually helped dispel some of the chill. Perhaps that was just the numbness, the illusion of warmth as I froze. Sleep, not death, took me swiftly.

A swirling wind had whipped up around me and I thought I'd heard it speak. It lifted and carried me on. I had been swept along in the bed of leaves, moving quickly, as I'd fallen into a dream. That could have been part of the dream itself, I thought, but felt that it wasn't.

"I may be crazy, I probably am, but is it possible that the wind spoke to me?"

He paused in midstride and nodded. "Yes. Well, no. The wind doesn't speak, but wind sprites do. What did it say?"

Every step was killing me but the man kept walking, dragging me with him. "It said something like 'Keep going. I'll take you to find help' – is that even possible?"

"Quite possible, and I rather think, probable. You said the forest looks different now. How so?"

"It's autumn here. It looked like the winter from hell back there. Nothing was alive, not even the grass. I'd walked a long way, but not far enough to escape the dead trees." I remembered the way the wind had howled through the bony branches, arms clanging together in worship of the darkness.

"You must have been in the Central Lands. So, you definitely came through the Dead Spring. How did you come so far? It's a long way from there to here."

"I don't really know. I just sort-of arrived here."

"Interesting. ...." He trailed off in thought.

Talking hurt. Thinking didn't feel great either, so I just focused on putting one foot in front of the other. The carpet of leaves was red, gold, and yellow – bits of fire speckled the gravelly trail. I no longer felt the forest's eyes on me, no longer felt the bony fingertips of the reaper stroking my cheek with seductive affection, but I still felt cold as the grave.

The man's eyes studied me. I could feel his gaze on the top of my head. His long fingers clutched my shoulder, keeping me from falling as I fumble-footed on. Never mind the Dead Spring, the country, the owl and the stranger. I only had one question. I shivered from the pit of my hollow stomach hoping to find the answer hovering in the chilly breeze that lifted my hair. One question – Who am I?