



Deeper than Blood
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Chapter 1

The old farmhouse, once such a familiar part of my childhood, has been devastated by the blaze. The thick stone walls are scorched and fatally cracked, there are deep oblong gaps where the windows used to be, and all that survives of the roof are smouldering rafters, picked clean of their slates, jutting black and naked into the pale dawn sky.

This was a bad one, all right. Admittedly, after ten years with Red Watch, I've seen worse blazes than this, but never one that had such a painful claim on my emotions, never one this personal.

The rest of the Watch stand over by the fire engine, weary after last night's efforts, their helmets tipped back on their heads. They speak gravely about the old couple who perished and hand round a pack of cigarettes. I'm the only one in front of the farmhouse. For the moment, thankfully, the others appear to have forgotten me.

The front door yawns open, enticing me inside.

I walk nervously towards the house, my boots crunching on fragments of slate and shattered glass. This is a bad idea and I know it - I'm breaking every regulation in the book - but at the same time, I can't help myself. For the first time in years I picture Hillie's worried face and hear her voice in my head. "I beg of you," she says, "don't go in there. Why dig up the past? What good can it do?" But the house has an irresistible pull. I have no choice. And besides, from what I can recall, Hillie's advice was largely unreliable anyway.

Unseen, I cross the threshold and enter the gloomy hell of another world. It's hard to believe that a few hours ago this was someone's home. The air is chokingly warm and every surface is thick with grime. Filthy water bleeds through the ceiling, dripping on the brittle linoleum with a sharp *tick, tick, tick*.

The hallway is long and narrow. If I remember correctly, the door to my left leads into the sitting room. I turn the tarnished handle and push, but the door is stubborn - its hinges have seized. Not easily dissuaded, I throw my shoulder against the bone-dry panelling, and with a loud

crack the door quite literally falls open, crashing to the floor and sending up a gloomy cloud of soot.

The sitting room is a ruined version of the one I knew.

Nothing has actually been burnt - the fire ignited upstairs and spread ravenously up to the roof - but the damage down here is considerable just the same. The intense heat burst the pane from the window, and the smoke and smothering foam have tainted everything else. The walls are cluttered with dozens of different picture frames, their contents obscured by soot. They didn't used to be here. I know they didn't. The sitting room was always fairly Spartan. On the mahogany mantelpiece yet more frames stand in rank, these presumably the most cherished.

Curious, I pick one up and rub its glass clean with my thumb.

Revealed is a photograph of a scrawny blond-haired boy aged about nine or ten, grinning squintily in bright sunshine. I know him - or rather, I knew him. His name was Leo Blake, and back in the summer when this photograph was taken he was my best friend.

Unsettled, I return the picture to its place on the mantelpiece.

I should have realised. I don't know why I didn't.

Every frame in this room will contain a photograph of Leo.

This is his shrine.

Chapter 2

Leo Blake was weird. Anyone who knew him would tell you that. Of course, he had other qualities too - he was clever, kind-hearted, sensitive and wildly imaginative - but most people were blind to all but his weirdness. They never took the trouble to scratch beneath the surface.

Leo, to borrow his own description, was something of a midget. He was dwarfed by his classmates at school and his head looked disproportionately big on his spindly body. He had the palest eyes that I have ever known - almost colourless - and stubborn, wheat-textured hair that no amount of combing would persuade to lie flat. He was incurably shy, and was so reluctant to draw attention to himself that he steadfastly refused to speak in company; which, coupled with his odd appearance, effectively rendered him an outcast.

We first got to know one another after I saw him being bullied in a school corridor. Two older boys were roughing him up - shoving him back and forth, kicking at his ankles, tipping his books out of his bag - and he was suffering this indignity quietly and without complaint.

It would give me a warm glow of pride to say that I charged in like some kind of hero, but that wasn't what happened. Instead, heeding a cowardly instinct for self-preservation, I hung back until the bullies got bored and wandered away before offering to help Leo pick up his books.

"You OK?" I asked him.

He nodded, eyes down. His chest wheezed asthmatically.

"You should fight back," I told him. "Stand up for yourself."

"It makes things worse," he mumbled.

He tucked his bag under his arm (the strap had broken during the tussle) and started to walk away from me down the corridor. Then he paused and looked back. For a moment, I thought he might be about to thank me. Instead, he asked me a question so bizarre and so completely incongruous that I almost laughed.

"Want to see a two-headed cow?"

He took a cautious step back towards me, and then, with a surprising torrent of words, he explained that he lived on a dairy farm and that late

last night one of the cows had given birth to a malformed calf. "Two heads," he emphasised, his eyes ablaze with rare excitement. "Want to see it?"

How could any self-respecting schoolboy refuse an offer like that?

To my disappointment, when we got to the farm later that afternoon the calf was dead. It had survived only a few pitiful hours before being put down. I had somehow expected to find it frolicking in a meadow, its twin heads lowing in unison. Instead, I was shown a cold carcass in a dank, foul-smelling cow shed. The calf's first head was normal in appearance, but the second was an undernourished horror: a blind lump of flesh, only half the size it should have been, hanging like a tumour from the poor creature's neck.

A man's hand clasped my shoulder. It was Leo's father.

"Shame the little chap had to die," he said. "One of God's creatures, after all. But the vet insisted. And who am I to argue with the vet?"

He paused, and then asked: "Will you be staying for tea? We've scones and strawberry jam on the table."

Chapter 3

The flag-stoned kitchen, where I ate countless scones during that unforgettable summer, is the least damaged room in the Blake's burnt farmhouse. The pine table stands where it always did, as does the range, a motley collection of pots and pans dangling above it. In the deep, old-fashioned sink, waiting to be washed, are two baking tins, a wooden spoon and a mixing bowl.

They make me think of Mrs Blake. No doubt she left them there to soak, not knowing that she would never be able to finish them off.

She used to tease me about the amount of time that I spent at the farm. "You're getting to be one of the family," she would say, smiling fondly. "Leo's long-lost brother."

I have to admit, the idea had a certain appeal.

It's strange, but now I think about it, I can no longer recall the process of becoming such firm friends with Leo. It just happened. Perhaps new relationships are easier to forge when you're young. Certainly, the farm itself was a major attraction - it was a boy's paradise, all that open space, dirt, and machinery to revel in - but there was more to our friendship than merely that.

Although Leo and I were roughly the same age, Leo, despite his stunted growth, always seemed much older than me. His mind was constantly active, challenging the world around him, forming ideas and opinions far beyond his years. And he was blessed with a remarkable imagination. He could conjure up the most fanciful stories on the spur of the moment, and even when relating the truth, he had a gift for exaggeration that could twist the dullest tale into something funnier and more interesting to hear.

Some people grow tiresome when you spend too much time in their company. With Leo, it was the opposite. The more I got to know him, the more I liked him. He was a complete one-off.

His parents were clearly proud of him. They cared for him with a passion which at times seemed overwhelming. They did everything in their power to shield him from harm, and from the outside world in general,

providing him with a secure cocoon in which he could grow up untroubled by pain.

Ironically, it was that very air of protectiveness that nurtured Leo's fateful need to rebel. Leo hated to be cosseted. Absolutely hated it. And he responded by developing a secret desire for risk. He was never more alive than when flirting with danger.

He always carried a pen-knife. To impress me, he used to splay his hand on the ground and stab the blade into the gaps between his fingers, going faster and faster until injury seemed unavoidable. Finally, perhaps inevitably, he misjudged the trick. The blade sliced into the little finger of his left hand, pinning it to the ground. He instinctively yanked his hand back in agony, ripping his finger so badly in the process that it later had to be amputated just above the knuckle.

Leo was remarkably unconcerned about the loss. When the bandages came off, he displayed his three-fingered hand to me with evident pride.

Mrs Blake, though, was horrified by the accident.

Not only did she confiscate the pen-knife, but she also put every knife on the farm into a locked drawer and kept the key with her at all times. If anyone wanted to cut anything, they had to ask her permission first. She was determined that nothing like that would ever happen to her son again.

Chapter 4

"I hate them," Leo said one afternoon, the wind ruffling his blond hair.

"Who?"

"Mum and Dad."

"Rubbish," I said.

"You don't know them like I do. They treat me like I'm four years old. Don't do this, don't do that. I'm ten. I can look after myself."

We were sitting astride the corrugated-iron roof of the cow shed.

Needless to say, Mr and Mrs Blake were not around to see us. They had gone into the village for half-an-hour, leaving us alone on the strict understanding that we would not stray from the farmyard. Well, we had complied with that request. Leo's cunning mind had worked out a route up to the roof - a route which made use of a conveniently parked tractor, a drainpipe, and an overhanging sycamore tree.

The view alone was worth the effort. In one direction, the grey slate roofs of the village huddled together in the valley, and in the other, the shimmering sea could be seen in the gap between two distant hills.

"Anyway," Leo said, picking tiny flecks of moss off the roof, "they're witches."

"What?" I grinned at him, sensing the beginning of one of his imaginative tales.

"Well, not proper witches. I mean, they don't fly around on broomsticks or anything. But sometimes, now and again, they use black magic to get what they want."

"Yeah, right. Like what, for instance?"

"Like me." A gust of wind buffeted us, briefly rippling our T-shirts. "They wanted a child," Leo explained. "And, I mean, they wanted one really badly. But they couldn't have one. At least, that's what the doctors said. All the experts gave up. So, when science let them down, they turned to sorcery instead - and hey presto, along came little me. If you ask me, that's what made me so funny-looking. I'm a runt. Nature never meant for me to be born."

I gazed at Leo, for once stuck for words. His odd appearance was no longer noticeable to me, but evidently it was something that troubled him deeply - and he appeared to blame his parents.

"You're not funny-looking," I said. "You're just ... special."

It was corny, I know, but it was the best I could manage, and amazingly it did the trick. Leo laughed. Then he spat into the palm of his hand and offered it to me. "Deeper than blood," he said.

I spat into my hand, too, and we shook.

"Deeper than blood," I repeated.

It was an oath we we had initiated early in the summer. I can't remember now which of us thought of it, but it seemed a perfect symbol of our loyalty to one another.

Suddenly, galvanised by some unspoken inspiration, Leo sprang to his feet. I thought he was going to climb back down to the ground, but instead he held out his arms like a tightrope walker and set off along the apex of the roof, placing his feet with theatrical poise, heading away from the overhanging sycamore branch that had delivered us here.

"Leo, what are you doing?"

"Getting a rush!" he said. "Adrenalin! You should try it some time!"

A knot of dread tightened deep within me. The wind was in a playful mood - calm for minutes on end, then blasting at us out of nowhere. And the cow shed roof raked steeply away on either side without hope of a soft landing.

"Be careful, Leo," I warned him, nervously.

I should have known better.

He threw me a furious glance, one that stung at my heart and made me wish I hadn't spoken. "You sound like my mum," he said, accusingly. Then, one perilous step after another, he continued on his way.

The roof was unsafe, I was convinced of it. The small bolts securing the various corrugated panels had been weakened by rust, and the panels themselves had never been intended to bear weight - I could hear them creaking as he walked.

As if seizing its chance, a strong gust rushed up the sloping roof and caught Leo at his most vulnerable - in mid stride. He instinctively planted both feet and swung his arms, trying to resist the breeze and maintain his balance. My heart froze as I watched him.

His feet slipped and skidded.

"Leo!" I yelled.

To my surprise, Leo inexplicably regained his composure and looked back at me, his hands perched casually on his hips. He was grinning, quite unperturbed.

"Gotcha!" he said. "Ha! You should see your face! You practically wet your pants!"

"Oh, yeah?" I said, my face reddening, overcome with relief and ashamed at my display of fear. "Well, I take back what I said, Leo Blake. You're not special at all. You're weird - you're the weirdest person I know!"

Leo laughed. "And proud of it!"

In the distance, on the road leading to the farm, a bright flash caught my eye. It was a car windscreen glinting in the sun. Mr and Mrs Blake were coming home.

"Leo! It's your mum and dad!"

Leo glanced at the approaching car, then turned with impressive agility and hurried back towards me, his feet scarcely making a sound on the iron roof.

I turned around too and shuffled in a clumsy panic towards the sycamore branch. My whole body was trembling. My pulse was racing. I didn't see how we could possibly get down in time. Then, just as I grabbed hold of the branch, I heard a noise - gunshot loud - that scared me to my core.

I knew instantly, even without looking, what it was. As if to confirm my worst fears, there followed a muffled clanging din as a broken roof panel clattered to the floor deep inside the cow shed.

I looked over my shoulder.

Leo was nowhere in sight.

The shock of that moment lives with me still. Sometimes, completely out of the blue, the awfulness of it will revisit me, seizing my heart, draining my limbs of strength, and I have to put aside whatever I am doing and wait for the feeling to pass.

I remember every tiny detail.

I wish I didn't.

It was a hot day, the hottest for a long while, but high up there on that roof, suddenly alone, my skin was as cold as winter. I hardly dared move - hardly dared breathe - for fear that the roof would collapse beneath me too. I just sat there, stunned, probably in the early stages of shock, staring fixedly at the spot where Leo had dropped through the roof.

I could hardly comprehend what had happened.

There was a dark rectangular hole where the broken panel had been. At the bottom edge of the hole, I suddenly saw something move. My body jolted in surprise. There, hanging on - literally, for dear life - were three small fingers.

"Leo!" I yelled.

Instinct kicked in.

I crawled frantically back along the roof, bruising my kneecaps and grazing my hands as I scrambled over the corrugated surface. But when I reached Leo, it quickly became apparent that my hurry had been pointless.

There was nothing I could do for him.

The hole measured a neat four feet by three. Not large, by any means, but too wide for me to reach across and grab Leo's hand. His fingers were bleeding, I noticed, his skin torn by the sharp-edged metal. Blood described a thin snake down his arm and dripped from his elbow.

Incredibly, Leo made no sound.

I remember thinking, if it were me, I would be screaming in terror and begging for some kind of miracle. But Leo simply hung there, perhaps already resigned to his fate. He slowly craned his neck and looked up at me. Our gazes locked for what felt like an age. And though it shames me to this day to admit it, I couldn't think of a single thing to say to him. Nothing. Not even an offer of false hope.

We simply stared at one another.

The Blake's car pulled into the farmyard, its tyres rattling over the cattle grid.

A loud metallic snap startled me.

The panel that Leo was hanging from had bent under his weight.

It had creased downwards in an ominous V shape, and Leo's fingers were sliding, lubricated by their own blood, dragging agonisingly across the metal.

More than anything else, in that last moment I wanted to reach out and grab his hand and somehow lift him to safety. But I couldn't do it. The distance between us was too great. There was no way to save him without putting my life in jeopardy too.

He never took his eyes off me.

I heard the Blakes get out of their car.

I saw Leo slip and disappear.

There was a terrible, breathless moment of stillness, as if the whole world had ceased to move - and then a hard, dull thud.

Mrs Blake screamed.

Chapter 5

The loss of a friend is difficult enough for an adult to cope with, but for a child, to whom death is so distant as to be incomprehensible, it is a hundred times worse.

At least, that's what Hillie told me.

Dr Hilary Bestwick was my therapist. She insisted that I called her Hillie, as if we were the most familiar of friends. She was a plump, middle-aged woman who always wore jeans and T-shirts in the belief that it made her more accessible to her younger patients. I had no idea how long our therapy sessions would last. As it turned out, I saw Hillie on and off for nearly five years after Leo's death. Too long. And not, I realise now, because I was slow to recover, but because Hillie herself was ineffective as a cure.

In the early sessions, we discussed anything but Leo. We should only broach the subject, Hillie advised, if I felt up to it. Well, most of the time, I didn't. Leo no longer existed. He had been pushed from my mind. Denied. Buried. Forgotten.

And then, about six months into my treatment, the nightmares began.

They were always the same.

Over and over again, I would see his calm face gazing up at me through the hole in the cow shed roof, and I would suffer the agony of knowing what was about to happen while being helpless to prevent it. Sometimes, I would be able to reach out and take his hand, but the outcome never changed. His fingers would invariably slacken and slip from my grasp, and I would jolt wide awake, heart pounding, Mrs Blake's scream still loud in my head.

To begin with, I kept the nightmares to myself, not wanting to discuss them with anyone - least of all Hillie - but she deduced from the shadows under my eyes that something was wrong.

"I have an theory," she said. "I think you feel guilty. Is that what it is? Do you feel guilty that you let Leo down?"

I didn't answer. But yes, that was exactly what it was. And I didn't need therapy sessions with Hillie to point it out.

In time, the nightmares became less frequent, but I was never entirely free of them, and nothing Hillie could say really helped.

As my fifteenth birthday approached, it became clear to me that drastic action was called for. without a word to Hillie, I decided to take matters into my own hands and confront my fears head on. I would visit the Blake's farm.

Chapter 6

It was a late November morning, steely-skied and threatening snow, and the cold hurt my cheeks and turned my breath to silver as I vaulted over the five-bar gate into the farmyard. Outwardly, the farm had not changed. No time seemed to have passed at all. I half expected to see the farmhouse door swing open and for Leo to be standing there, grinning from ear to ear. "Gotcha!" he would say. "Ha! You should see your face!"

If only.

In fact, I knew that the farmhouse was empty. I had made certain of that. Mr and Mrs Blake had driven into the village on their weekly shopping trip and would be gone for at least an hour. It would pain them to know that I was here. Although they had never directly blamed me, I was aware that in their eyes I was somehow accountable for what had happened to Leo. They had made no attempt to contact me since his death and I had been equally reticent about contacting them.

I took a diagonal route across the farmyard.

Looming before me was the cow shed, a bleak spectre against the wintry landscape. The sight of it made me uneasy, but I refused to look away. A couple of panels in the roof were a lighter shade than the rest, I noticed - the passing seasons had done nothing to rob them of their newness - but apart from that it was unchanged.

As I neared the gaping entrance to the shed, my unease deepened into outright dread. I told myself not to be so foolish. I was nearly fifteen, taller than my parents and within grasping distance of manhood. There was no reason to be afraid. No reason at all.

I went into the shed.

It was full of shadows, oppressive and gloomy, and seemed, to me at any rate, to reek of death. To my right was a row of empty stalls where the cows stood twice a day to get milked. Above me, sparrows flitted in the roof-space, irritated at my intrusion. I looked up, still walking, trying to gauge whereabouts Leo had dropped through, but it was too dark up there to make out which roof panel was which.

I looked down again - and stopped dead in my tracks.

Someone was sitting in a corner of one of the stalls.

It was a boy: pale, naked, and shockingly thin.

Our eyes met, and the ground dropped from under me.

"Leo... ?" I said, stunned.

He displayed not a flicker of recognition. His eyes were dull and lifeless, and his head had a disturbingly crooked look, as if his skull had cracked and then been clumsily set. His clothes and shoes lay in a careless heap by his side. He seemed oblivious to the cold. A large sliver of glass was in his hand - a dagger-shaped fragment of broken milk bottle by the look of it - and I realised, suddenly appalled, that he had been cutting himself with it, hacking and stabbing at his own bare flesh. There were horrible wounds in his thighs, abdomen and forearms. By rights, he should have been drenched in his own blood, but there was hardly a trace of it. Even the deepest cuts had surrendered no more than a trickle. It was as if he lacked the ability to bleed.

Leo held out the broken glass, wanting me to take it from him.

"Please," he said, his voice weak and slurred. "Leo... want... to die." His eyes slowly looked from me to the glass, and then back at me. "Please."

I shook my head and backed away. "No... "

"Want—to die."

"No!"

Disappointed at my unwillingness to help, Leo raised the lethal shard and stuck it deep into his wrist.

I turned and ran, and didn't stop running until I got home.

Chapter 7

"I see," Hillie said, her gaze intent, the tip of her pencil resting thoughtfully against her lower lip. "Tell me, what do you suppose that means?"

"Means?"

"Well, that you should hallucinate in this way. What do you suppose it means?"

I said nothing. Hillie had no idea. To her, everything I said was just another piece in a psychological puzzle.

Again and again, I thought of what Leo had told me that last afternoon together - that his parents were witches, that they used black magic to get what they wanted. At the time, I hadn't taken him seriously, but now my scepticism had been thrown into doubt. Could they have raised their son from the dead? Was it possible? If so, they had done a poor job of it. The Leo I had seen in the shed had been a dullard, barely able to speak properly. And he hadn't looked any older than the day he died. Admittedly, Leo had always been small, but he should have grown at least a bit, he should have begun to mature.

The more I thought about it, the more upsetting and impossible the idea seemed.

Over the next few weeks, clutching at the loose threads of my sanity, I fell prey to Hillie's persuasion and allowed her to convince me that what I had seen that day was a phantom, a manifestation of my own disturbed state of mind. It was a necessary belief. The alternative was too awful to contemplate.

"Good," said Hillie, satisfied with my acceptance of her ideas. "Good. I think we're beginning to make progress. Don't you?"

Soon after that, I gave up going to see her.

In the years since then, Leo has always lurked somewhere in my thoughts. Occasionally, it's the good times that come to mind, but more often than not it's the horror that returns to unsettle me, and every now and then one of the old nightmares will fetch me breathless from my sleep. Generally speaking, though, I've learned to cope with it. It's

history, I tell myself. It's done. It's past. There's nothing I can do to alter what happened, so there's no point torturing myself over it.

The one thing I had never intended to do was revisit the Blake's farm. But thanks to fate, that's exactly where I find myself.

I stand alone at the top of the stairs, surrounded by a scene of fire-damaged devastation. Even though the roof is open to the sky, with gentle morning light brightening the gaps between the rafters, the air is smoky and unpleasant to breathe. A couple of massive timbers, still warm and smouldering, have crashed down and punched holes in the floor.

As I walk, I tread gingerly, testing each footstep before trusting it with my full weight. The floorboards will have been weakened by the blaze and I don't want to risk an accident.

I reach Leo's bedroom door. It appears to be made of charcoal. The tell-tale pattern of burn marks on the surrounding wall indicate that behind it lies the seat of the blaze.

I shove at the door, forcing it open, and step inside.

The bedroom is an empty shell, bereft of colour, reduced entirely to black and shades of grey. Only a small, irregular piece of ceiling remains tenuously in place. Every vestige of decoration has been stripped away. The sole suggestion that this room was once inhabited is an iron bedstead, and even that is damaged - its blackened rods have warped and snapped, and it looks like the carcass of a monstrous beetle, tipped helplessly on its back.

My boots raise slow clouds of ash. It's like walking on the moon.

On the floor, under the gaping window, I notice a paraffin can lying on its side. It is partly concealed under a fall of debris. Undoubtedly, this was the fuel that started the blaze - but what of the spark? I scout carefully around the can, foraging through the ashes, fully expecting to discover the remains of a box of matches or a cigarette lighter. Instead, to my surprise, I touch something soft, and when I see what it is, I recoil in absolute horror.

It is a three-fingered hand.

Chapter 8

If I'm truthful, I suppose at some denied, subconscious level I had expected to find him here - otherwise, I wouldn't have entered the house in the first place - but even so, it sickens and appals me to find him like this.

A noxious stench emanates from his corpse, and I struggle to keep from gagging. My breath comes in ragged, hitching gasps as I begin to uncover him, brushing away the thickest of the ash and picking off bits of rubble. It is a job best done swiftly and without too much thought. But no matter how hard I try, I can't-help imagining how Leo must have suffered - and how desperate he must have been to resort to this.

From his posture, with one arm stretched out towards the dropped paraffin can, it seems clear that he doused himself with fuel before striking a match. His body is hideously burned. In places, his flesh is eaten all the way down to the bone, and his face is a grotesque ruin, bearing only a passing resemblance to anything human.

But the single most disturbing aspect, to me anyway, is his size.

He hasn't grown one bit. He is still no more than ten years old.

My eyesight blurs with hot, furious tears. Angrily, I wipe them away with my knuckles. Damn Leo's parents. Damn them. How could they have been so blind to the pain they had inflicted? What perverted kind of love could have inspired them?

I have no idea how they managed to bring him back to life after the accident - whether it was Satanism they had dabbled in or some form of voodoo, no one would ever know - but I hated them for it. All these years, Leo had been imprisoned inside the body of a child, his brain a sullied parody of its former self.

How many times, I wonder, had Leo tried to kill himself before this - and how many times had his parents selfishly saved him? Were they blind to his suffering? Surely they could see that the kindest thing to do was to release him from his tortured existence.

Of course, they are not alone in their guilt.

That time when I had discovered him cutting his wrists and he had offered me the shard of broken glass. I had turned and fled and

convinced myself that the whole thing had been an illusion. And I was supposed to be his friend. Some friend. When he needed me most, I had failed him utterly.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "God, Leo, I'm sorry... "

A sound catches my attention - barely audible, right on the limits of perception. It is a faint, intermittent whistle, like air being forced through a painfully restricted gap.

Suddenly, a grit-sized fragment of broken brick rolls off Leo's chest and tumbles to the floor.

I stare at it, and my blood runs to ice as I realise what is happening.

He is breathing.

Shallowly, scarcely at all, but breathing.

"No... !"

Shock sends frenzied impulses to my legs and I stagger backwards, away from him, anxious to put some distance between us. My heel strikes an obstacle and I stumble and fall, landing with a leaden crash, clattering my elbows and bumping the base of my spine amidst the dust and debris on the bedroom floor.

As I lie there, hearing the thunder of my pulse, waiting for the cloud of ash surrounding me to settle, I try to believe that my imagination has played a trick on me - surely, Leo is too seriously burned, too hopelessly damaged, to actually be alive.

But it is true.

As the air gradually clears, I see the tiny movement of his lungs. The vile sorcery that restored him to life seems reluctant to release its grip on him.

I get slowly to my feet.

My initial panic subsides. Leo is my friend, after all, and I am his. That means something. We have a duty to one another.

Beside me is the wrecked bedstead, the slender iron rods of its frame splayed out like giant needles. I grasp one of the rods and twist it free. It breaks off with an easy snap.

With it in hand, I return to Leo's side.

I rest its cold tip lightly on his sternum. Amazingly, I can feel the rise and fall of his chest through it. I can almost feel his heartbeat. His head turns towards me just a fraction, all the movement he can manage, as if, through his agony, he wants to acknowledge my presence.

Does he know who I am? Does he sense what I am about to do for him? I hope so.

"Deeper than blood, Leo... "

With all my strength, and all my will, I force the lethal rod downwards, deep into Leo's grateful heart.

Feedback

Feedback is welcome

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