

The Dark Garden excerpt

The route to escape was thorny and bloody. The trees had become as dangerous as the people Pybba was trying to get away from. Roots tangled around his feet and pulled him to the ground. The density of the wood turned the day to night. But he had to keep on or die.

The hounds still yowled even though they could not scramble through the twisted branches; for that, Pybba thanked the gods. His sword was lost and so was his direction. Nevertheless, he was alive and this forest could not last forever. He told himself that each time he fell into brambles. The woodlands had drawn more blood than the battlefield.

As his journey into the thickened vegetation stretched on, Pybba became light-headed. His blood loss started to take its toll. He was aware of its stickiness and abundance by his sodden clothes and red hands. There was no pain but he knew from experience that it would arrive soon. His battle heart and the fates would take him to safety or the afterlife and then deliver his suffering.

The rumbling in his belly reminded him that he had not eaten since sunset the day before and the lack of fuel sapped his energy, too. He began to slow down. Since the sound of shouting men and barking dogs had subsided, Pybba thought that it was safe to stop. Immediately his legs went soft as if the bones had been removed and he crashed to the ground. He closed his eyes, exhausted.

The fluttering in his chest made him open his eyes. His face was against the rough bark of an old tree; he could feel its scratchiness. Was it the gateway to the otherworld? Pybba felt very strange. It was as if he was only partially aware, partially alive. He tried to move his head. His neck was stiff but he could lift it a little.

In front of him there shone a light. All the black tree trunks opened to reveal a circle of brightness, round like the Hunters' Moon, enticing, calm.

Pybba did not know what it was, whether it was the afterlife drawing him towards the entrance or a visit from the gods themselves. Either way, he knew it was a good sign and that he must go to it. In his half-state, he stood up, trembling all over. He could make his legs move although he was not aware of them. Pybba forced his way between the entwined branches, reaching towards the light.

He could smell the fruity, sweet scent of apples tinged with tansy. The sun was shining and it was warm. The knotted tension inside his bowels began to dissipate. Then his eyes fell onto the source of the light. Only it was not a divine radiance but a patch of daisies, brilliant in the sunlight.

Pybba smiled to himself. "So I am alive after all." He crouched down to pluck one of the small white flowers.

