

A DARKLING POOL AGAIN

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THE WIND

The wind rises in angry swells,
Careless in motion,
Nature rebels in furious gulps,
Rising from a whisper to a screaming gale,
The suggestion lifts and turns,
Twists and falls,
Moving unseen in waves of glorious emotion,
A touch can serve to elate, to horrify,
To steal away the night,
To belittle the marvels of man,
As the moment is lost to a callous and curious embrace,
The wind dies and nothing remains the same.

PART ONE:
Jason Greeves Investigates:
MISERY IN THE DARKNESS

Road to Misfortune

The wail of the wind whistled through the trees screaming in a cacophony of voices that sounded like the cries of the dead who had been forced to remain behind anchored to this world through some misdeed or misfortune. There was a sweet, sickly scent carried on the air that Jason Greeves found all too familiar. The rain had begun to fall, droplets whipped into a frenzy by the violence of the wind that soon became far more pronounced. This did nothing to diminish the syrupy taint lingering with insistence about the mausoleum. As Greeves stepped into the clearing, the wind died with an abruptness that was both disturbing and unnatural. The smell persisted and became so intense as to make the air seem too heavy to offer a breath without some effort. He retreated a step and the wind immediately rose all about him, the onrush furious in an effort to draw him away. Jason Greeves stood staunch against the onslaught and moved back into the clearing. Somehow after all this time he should have known better than to expect some natural law to apply to this place. The doors to the mausoleum lay open in greeting. He could not recollect whether they had been in this condition a moment before. The darkness poured out of every crack and crevice like inky, black liquid, oozing with malevolent intent. The feeling made his skin crawl as if the vestiges of a spider's web began to form about him. The sweet, sickly odour filled his gullet, the heaviness building in the pit of his stomach. He could not retreat. Only the way forward provided the least restriction. Everything drew him on.

Jason closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. He felt remarkably calm. Reaching into his pocket he drew out his cigarettes and matches. He struck a match but the thick viscous darkness remained oblivious to the light. Jason turned a cigarette in his fingers and lit up immediately drawing in a deep and satisfying draught. When he opened his eyes again, he was within the mausoleum. He could already feel the presence of the malevolent spirit stirring. The darkness was natural here. The sweet smell persisted. He still could not see but he was aware of everything around him in an abstract sense. The stone was cracked and worn by time and the violence that had raged here so long ago. Jason hesitated. The ground had been disturbed. The rich soil rose in two mounds and a dull light began to rise, pushing back the darkness. Jason yawned and discarded the cigarette. The sweet taint in the air began to take on a singularly unwholesome aroma. Suddenly, the whole mausoleum shook with the violence of the rise of an apparition. The twisted manifestation swelled from the earth and stretched in the darkness pushing back the pitch to reveal a grotesque form completely alien to the human mind. The wisps of light that clung to the being were akin to liquid fire. Jason stood his ground. *Defiant*. Two claw-like appendages stretched out at either side of this maniacal being. Jason waited with purpose. The creature had to form completely. Right now, it remained somewhere between the living world and an incorporeal reality. He had to be ready. Once the transformation was complete, the creature would become aware of his presence. There would be cause enough to panic then. Jason reached inside his jacket and took out the flare gun, inserting the cartridge while keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the manifestation of the demon in the retreating darkness. When the light died again, he knew the creature would be here, as real a force of terror as he had ever faced before. Even now the light was beginning to wane. The form began to take hold. The elongated digits on the arms became clear, culminating in claws that became solid. They could rend the weak flesh of a man in an instant. The face of the creature became a dark tissue formed in the fires of the *Abyss*, the gaping maw widening to reveal a full mouth of sharp teeth. The eyes of the apparition were pools of darkness as intense as the inky blackness that had formed about the mausoleum. The stomach turning reek, from the bowels of some foul opening to a place so terrible as to make the worse sewer seem homely by comparison, had now all but suppressed the sweet smell. The violence shook the mausoleum again. Jason could not keep his feet. *Damn*. He fell and let go of the flare gun. The light died giving way to the darkness of the mausoleum. Jason frantically fumbled in the dark trying to find the flare gun. In the next moment, he felt the talons rip into his back and knew the wound had been profound enough to cut deep, reaching the bone in his right shoulder. Jason cursed and stifled a scream. This *bastard* was faster than he thought. He rolled away from the blow and scrambled to find the weapon.

‘How does it feel, Guardian? Can you smell the blood flow? Does it excite your senses as much as it does mine? Too much time has passed since I have tasted such a delightful and succulent meal. You will feed me. You will make me strong again.’

The creature was right. He did smell the blood and the aroma was like food to a starving man. He could feel the fangs extending in his mouth and the rage rising in the pit of his stomach. The hunger was unbearable. Jason

fought to control the powerful urge rising within him. The darkness retreated from the fire burning in his eyes. He could see the creature in all its horrifying glory. The demon stood erect like a man, but the slick black skin and malicious appendages too numerous to count, left him with no doubt. The flared nostrils, the wide maw, the grotesquely proportioned head and terrifying stature of the demon stretched in the darkness like a predator preparing to lunge. Jason regained his feet and like an animal forgot all that he had come here for. With alarming speed he lunged for the demon, his own hunger soaking up his humanity. The demon was struck by the surprise of Jason's furious assault. The disbelief that such a puny mortal could master such strength was enough to topple the creature. Jason bit deep into the dark flesh of the demon and sipped on the tainted blood in vigorous gulps. The hunger overwhelmed him. His mind was lost to the moment of need. The demon thrashed about in fury. The powerful appendages struck Greeves again and again but with little immediate effect. *Panic.* The Guardian had come to destroy a demon but who was more the monster here? The creature manoeuvred its great frame in an effort to take hold of Greeves. Jason was thrown backward with an alarming fury for self-preservation. The demon paused in an effort to recover from the unexpected assault. Jason's mind cleared as his head struck the wall. The fangs in his mouth retreated. The blaze in his eyes faded. *He was dazed.* The demon screamed in unrestrained rage and plunged through the darkness to murder this curious victim. Jason's hand found the flare gun. Somehow he managed to raise the weapon and fire. The flame engulfed the demon. The scream piercing the night reached a terrifying pitch. Jason scrambled from the mausoleum as fire engulfed the creature. He rolled out into the tempestuous night as the rain washed over his body. The wind pushed down on him as he lay there. The water cleansed the thick black liquid from his mouth and drenched him completely, washing away his guilt, his crime and the visible traces of the monster within. His eyes closed and he lay there impervious to the violence inflicted on his person. There had to be a better way to make a living. While consciousness remained, he had to wonder if he had become more like the evil he sought to expunge from the world. The thought enclosed his mind to a nightmare. He lay there in the darkness of the forest beside the mausoleum, lost, alone and tainted by the evil of something he tried to forget but could never again deny.

'He's doing it again,' shouted Jonathan in an attempt to be heard over the violence of the storm.

Stephanie cast him a questioning glance while the Major tried feverishly to get the door to the car open. The wind pummelled them but most of all it lent such force as to make opening the door difficult. Jonathan pulled hard, bracing his foot against the vehicle. Together, they finally managed to get it open. Stephanie quickly eased herself into the back. Jonathan and the Major followed at once. The Major snapped his hands inside as the door closed with brutal force and had cause to check to see that all of his fingers were still intact.

'I said, he's doing it again!'

Stephanie lit up two cigarettes and passed one to Jonathan. 'I heard you the first time, Jonathan. What do you want me to say? Do you want to follow him out into that storm when he specifically told you not to? We have been through this before. The last time we decided to ignore his advice, we nearly got him killed. I don't know about you, but I would very much like my husband back alive and in one piece.'

Jonathan brushed back his hair with his hand. They were all soaked right through. If the Major had anything to add to the conversation, he kept it to himself. He just sat there staring out into a night that offered no hope of observing more than a foot in front of the car. Maybe he was just tired. They had been through a lot lately and there had hardly been even a moment to rest.

'We are supposed to be a team. What the hell are we doing out here at all if he feels inclined to go off alone to finish the job? He may be the Guardian, but sometimes he can be so infuriating. This is not a night to be out in. He can just as easily go and get himself killed as the rest of us.'

Stephanie sighed. There was no talking to Jonathan when he got himself into this mood.

'Maybe he has a good reason for making us stay here,' added the Major, his melancholy mood in no way lessened by Jason's decision.

'We have been through that before as well, Major. There is nothing wrong with my husband. If there was, I would know. I am his wife. Except for these expeditions into the dark, he rarely leaves my side.'

Jonathan made an effort to rub the rain from his eyes with a handkerchief that was just as soaked as the rest of his clothing. He could see the Major looking to him for support. The vexation that mapped his old friend's brow in a knot of pulsating veins did nothing to change his mind on the matter.

‘Hey, leave me out of this. I know you believe that Jason has changed since his time on the moor but c’mon. Except for a preference for meat a little rarer than usual and a persistence for staying up late when the rest of us are too tired to carry on, he’s the same old Jason Greeves we all know and love. As Stephanie said, if anyone would know, she would.’

The Major did not look convinced. He was stubborn.

‘Yes, and he practically sleeps all day. In fact, he is downright lethargic.’

Jonathan rolled his eyes around in his head. Major Denis J. Selby, Retired, may have been a practical man with his head firmly rooted in the reality of life, but he could be downright annoying when he got hold of something.

They were all tired and in sore need of rest, and a peaceful moment to reflect.

‘Major, you have to admit that Jason has cause to be more nocturnal of late. Most of what we are forced to face out here in the great unknown operates at night. After a while, such things are bound to have an effect,’ snapped Stephanie with more of a retort than she had intended.

The Major certainly didn’t want to worry Stephanie. He accepted her need to defend her husband. In fact, he admired that particular quality in the woman. She was loyal to a fault. Stephanie’s perception was far greater than either Jonathan’s or that of the Major. She had lived with evil longer than any of them. Her existence in the clutches of *Xaorn* gave her a better perspective of the charade most often played out by the manifestations of evil that rose to coerce and captivate the human mind. Still, the trouble at Ashtonby Grange seemed distant now. He just couldn’t understand why the two of them looked at Jason with such blind devotion. Greeves had changed. The battles with evil had changed him. Something happened on the moor and the Major could not rest until he was able to measure the cost and implications of their brush with the vampires. He had tried in vain to prove the point, short of confronting Jason himself. The Major had little choice but to let the matter rest, for now.

Suddenly, Stephanie’s face took on a countenance of abject horror. Her eyes widened and she groaned as the pain cut through her. She held her head and rocked gently back and forth. She had a connection with her husband that neither the Major nor Jonathan could understand, but they knew well that when she got like this, something was dreadfully wrong.

‘Jason is hurt.’

The words were barely spoken when the Major was out of the car, forcing the door open against the torrent of the wind with his legs. Jonathan was caught between a need to pursue and staying here to protect Stephanie.

‘Go! I’ll be all right. Follow the path to the mausoleum. Jason is there.’

Jonathan hesitated, but only for a moment. He was out of the car and following the Major up the trail before Stephanie could finish.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she moaned. Her eyes were tightly closed. The discomfort took a while to subside. She realised she was alone in the car, in the forest, in the storm, and the darkness screamed at her as the vehicle rocked violently in the embrace of the ill weather. Stephanie rolled herself into a ball and lay down behind the seat, cowering from the malevolence of the storm and hiding from the night like a lost child. The terror consumed her as the meek voice cried out to the friends that had left her behind again.

The Major ran through the trees, shaking off the fury with ease. He never paused to check where he was going. They had been this way before, albeit during the day, but the trail was obvious and Jason was in trouble. Jonathan found it difficult to keep up with him. He had to give up smoking. Jason might be able to shrug off the effects with the *gusto* of an adrenalin surge but Jonathan found that the more he gave into the craving, the more it drained his energy. For an old guy, the Major could still move. *Hell, for a guy of any age, Selby was a marvel.* Jonathan lost sight of him on occasion but he knew he could not be very far ahead. In spite of the weather, he heard the Major thrashing about just ahead of him. When he finally caught up, he found him crouched over Jason, examining him purposefully.

‘I’m afraid Mr Greeves is unconscious. He has three rather deep cuts across his back. One has been cut to the bone. We need to get him up and back to the car.’

Jonathan was out of breath. He groaned at the thought of having to carry Jason and was inclined to remember a similar experience in the not too distant past. Still, necessity can lend strength in such a dire situation.

Together, they lifted Greeves. Jason was unresponsive but the Major was sure he was breathing. However, how long he remained alive was up to how soon they could get him out of here and treat his wounds.

The wind buffeted them on the path down from the mausoleum. The trail was precarious from the wash of the rain and several times one of them lost his footing and slid down into the trees carrying Jason and the other with him. Invariably, Jonathan slipped far more than the Major. He cursed, the profanity lost in the storm. The muck, the rain and the brutality of the gale tried to force them back. Only through a sheer strength of will did they prevail at all, though progress was agonisingly slow. They were driven as much by a need to return to Stephanie as they were in an attempt to save Jason's life. This is what happens when you go off to do something so dangerous alone. There would be time for recriminations and debate later. Right now, they had their hands full just trying to make the attempt to stay on the path. There was no relief. Like so many times before, even the natural fury of nature's embrace seemed hell bent on working against them. The rising gale screamed at Jonathan and the Major as if their opposition caused far more harm than either of them was aware.

However, the scream that followed seemed less the call of some natural exodus through the trees, or some crack or crevice in the rocks of the nearby mountain, and more the voice of a human being crying out in anguish. The Major halted Jonathan with some effort. His eyes were wide with alarm. Fear welled up in Jonathan rising from the pit of his stomach without pause. They were caught between leaving Jason behind and running to save Stephanie. The Major took the full weight of the unconscious Greeves.

'Go! Go now! I will follow as fast as I can.'

Jonathan was gone, lost in the darkness in a moment. The Major paused to draw breath and to steel himself against the burden. He dragged Greeves and thanked God that the trail led down and not up. Still, the gradual decline was taxed more by the inadequate footing on this unstable path.

The rain washed over the car as if the floodgates had been opened and the whole weight of some distant sea had poured into the valley. The deluge struck and washed over the vehicle with violent and premeditated intent. The force of the gale caused the nearby branches of the beleaguered trees to bend towards the windows and play out a disturbing drumbeat that drove Stephanie even further into herself. Even though her eyes were squeezed tight, she detected the flash of light that could only be lightning striking the ground precariously close to the car. She trembled. There was something out there. Even now the whispers cried out to her, or from inside her. Soon the whispers became clear voices calling to her from the darkness. However, the cries disturbed her far less than the feelings and impressions that consumed her thoughts. The agony was so intense as to cause the pain to reach into her soul and manifest itself in her limbs, creeping like a numbing cold through her whole body.

Where were Jonathan and the Major? Where was Jason? How long had they been gone? Surely they should have been back by now. Jason was hurt.

Stephanie tried to make herself smaller. Maybe if she could be smaller, they would not notice her. The darkness screamed in agony. The voices rose all at once and invaded her mind. There were so many voices. She couldn't shut them all out. They were coming. She could feel them all around her.

'Help us,' they cried. 'Please help us.'

Stephanie was paralysed with fear. All the souls of the damned they had faced before and would face in time to come screamed at her in abject misery.

'Stop! Stop! I cannot take this! There are too many of you! Please stop!' Stephanie sobbed. Her tears seemed inadequate to satisfy the grief that consumed her soul. Her heart threatened to burst with the intensity of the feelings that clutched the besieged vessel. The rhythm beat strong, wild and erratic until the pain swelled in her chest and the unbearable cold spread further inside her. She could no longer feel her arms and legs. The numbing cold became too much. The voices persisted. The lightning flashed again, too close to ignore. Stephanie forced her eyes open with great effort. Wispy tendrils clung to the car oblivious to the violence of the storm. The faces formed from the haze, soulless eyes peering from the darkness. The glass to the rear of the car shattered from the weight of the burden as a tree fell, slamming with purposeful intent into the rear of the vehicle. The rain washed over Stephanie and the wispy tendrils retreated. The voices faded leaving Stephanie lost and alone in her anguish as her heart played on in step to the furious beat of the storm. Stephanie screamed as the eyes peered from the retreating darkness. Her mind hummed in the aftermath of despair as she slid down inside the car, limp and broken. The misery hung in the air as the storm washed her fragile form soaking the last of her resolve. The darkness had reached out and touched this delicate woman, forcing her awareness and very

nearly costing her the frail shell of sanity eroded by evil's embrace. Stephanie was unconscious, but the precarious sleep that had been forced upon her did nothing to alleviate the strain inflicted on her mind.