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VERGE OF A DARKLING POOL
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BAD DOG PUBLISHING

VERGE OF A DARKLING POOL
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All characters and events in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual places, events, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

To Birdie,
For her encouragement,
Genuine interest,
And for listening.
Remembered always...

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ANXIOUS DREAMS

There is no way to reach the day,
No hope from dark to light,
A fall is but a deep regret,
Playing to a fright,
The Darkling Pool is open now,
To feed again my fear,
Emptying out anxious dreams,
In a night that knows despair,
Where shadows grow,
To dance and weave,
Where whispers call,
To stifle hope,
Where the mind is plagued,
With no reprieve,
And all of life's a joke,
There is no end,
There is no hope,
There is no way to leave,
As the darkness closes all about,
The heart begins to heave...

PART ONE:
JASON GREEVES INVESTIGATES:
THE DARKE INFLUENCE

Prologue

A Night Without Hope

The snow whipped up a frenzy of furious swirls across the blanketed meadows, rendering visibility uncertain and any hope of venturing farther than the outer perimeter of the estate all but impossible. Stepping beyond this precarious threshold would invite a violent reprisal from the storm if exposed in the open terrain without any modicum of cover. Jonathan stayed to the periphery of the trees on the boundary of the land surrounding the house that had become home in every way in the last few years. The wooded areas on the land offered some protection from the brunt of the tempest but also had the potential to conceal any would-be antagonists. A subtle odour of decay clung to the air, but it was a natural inclination of decay brought on by a prolonged winter. Still, Jonathan wrinkled his nose against the olfactory taint and continued moving carefully up an uncertain path. He hated patrolling alone, but more so when the storm deemed fit to render any observation, at the very least suspect, and at most painful. Hearing was also greatly impaired. The gales harried him at every turn. Seeking refuge behind one of the evergreen trees proved equally unsettling as the wind agitated leaves and branches into an endless rustling cacophony to drown out any hope of an effective auditory warning. Coupled with worrying snaps and cracks, that could be wholly natural, the noise prohibited picking out a sound that might just keep Jonathan from harm or give him any indication of a nearby threat. The changes enacted by John Darke on those who lived in the shadows presented a higher level of peril to the living world. One could never be sure who the enemy was, let alone if a friend or ally had been compromised through some careless or deliberate exposure to the essence of that which had proved insidious in nature.

Jonathan had tried and failed to light a cigarette to stir a palliative calming effect by engaging in a familiar activity.

Even if the flame had taken, his hands shook so much in the cold that holding on to the lighter proved a challenge. The metal too offered an added inconvenience in the severely chill air. Jonathan shuddered. He pulled the heavy wool scarf tighter about his neck and chin, straightened the woolly hat on his head and closed his gloved hand to protect the one protruding finger he required to shoot the shotgun if such an action became necessary. Cutting away the required finger cover from the glove had been the Major's idea. Jonathan had to admit that it was effective in preventing the glove becoming snagged in the trigger guard when he needed to fire the weapon. He kept the shotgun on his shoulder as he was unwilling to bear the cold for the sake of holding the weapon at the ready. In truth, his inability to see any potential antagonist in this storm made the point largely moot. His patrolling of the estate was mostly for show. He was out here with the intent of dissuading an antagonist from venturing closer to the house by offering a possibility of discovery. His motivation was not necessarily to provide an early warning to the others. There were too many ways in to be sure of any security in this unyielding tempest. Jonathan was a lure – a focus for any would be transgressor. If he could get a shot off, they would know that something was wrong. Minutes might prove valuable in preparing for any threat. Harriet and Stephanie were on lookout too, albeit from inside the confines of the house on the upper story but how effective any vantage point they might occupy would be was a matter for debate.

Jonathan moved to wait under the shadow of a large oak tree, its wider trunk shielding him from the worst of the penetrating chill. He tried again to light a cigarette but with no success. He should have just lit up a pipe and brought it with him. Retrospection and all that rot was not much use after the fact.

Jonathan stamped his feet to instil some feeling into his lower extremities. While the tree kept the worst of the wind

chill from penetrating his heavy clothing, he was not shielded with regards to the sheer drop in temperature during the day, let alone in the encroaching night. The last light of a day that never really surfaced to be given that accolade faded with each passing moment. Jonathan could not stay out here much longer, and he certainly could not remain still. As he contemplated his diminishing situation, he caught a deliberate movement on his periphery. It was not a trick of the light or something disturbed by the force of the gale. The movement had been far too precise to be ascribed to an incidental act.

Jonathan let the strap of the shotgun slip from his shoulder and dropped the gun into his waiting hand. He pumped the chamber and rested his finger on the trigger, gritting his teeth against the awful cold that attacked his exposed digit. His eyes searched the surrounding area in the diminishing light. He took in a deep breath and let the exhalation out slowly, the plume filling the air like the smoke he craved. He had no hope of concealing his position and could only wait for the inevitable attack, knowing no matter how prepared he was, it would not be enough in the face of an unknown menace.

The air changed noticeably. The odour of decay took on a deliberate fragrance of rot as if something unsavoury had been introduced into an already questionable situation. Jonathan felt a wave of remorse hit him, as real and tangible a rebuke as if the emotions originated from some heartfelt trauma residing in his own past. *Despair*. The feeling was wretchedly invasive and staggered him. His own memories stirred to moments of deep lament and fear. The unwholesome wash of emotions drew out fragments of failures from his past dulling his mind to the here and now as Jonathan shook his head in a vain effort to dispel these troublesome thoughts. A hint of nausea followed. Jonathan felt the utter anguish of something that cried out from the deepest shadows of the trees – raw hopelessness that threatened to consume his resolve. He shook his head again

and forced his mind to focus on an enemy he could not see.

The nausea intensified but not so much as to force Jonathan to drop his guard. He defied the feelings, pushing thoughts of Harriet to the fore, calling up moments he had spent with Jamie, innocent laughter dispelling the tide of lament. The manifestation of negative emotions augmented his urge to light up but his eyes remained fixed on the darker pockets of the wooded area as he retreated a step and placed his back firmly against the surety of the tree, resolute and unyielding in providing a defensive rearguard. Jonathan took some solace from its strength as the despondency lingering in the air faded to be replaced by resentment. A deeper loathing followed and then nothing.

Every brooding shadow looked poised with intent. Pockets where the light had utterly fled seemed malignantly stirred against a living presence. Jonathan recovered any lapse of composure brought on by the wave of hopelessness that had reached out to break his scrutiny of the wooded areas, the brambles and bushes swaying energetically in the wind, the rustle of the leaves, and traces of snow penetrating the futile cover of the trees. He searched the darker pockets, looking for anything that seemed out of the ordinary.

Movement drew Jonathan's attention to the right half a moment before something erupted from a dense copse of snow-topped bushes on his left and struck him on the temple. The misdirection was deliberate and caught him in the midst of a half turn. His shotgun discharged recklessly as he felt the weight of the blow and fell. The discharge sprayed harmlessly into the air.

Jonathan struggled against the hard icy ground to regain his feet, conscious of the droplets of blood falling to a patch of snow. The blow had opened a two inch tear. It was not deep, but the wound stung sending a profounder hurt inward. His head ached and his vision blurred against the exertion of regaining his feet. He just about had the wherewithal to pump the shotgun again, chambering another cartridge before a

dark shadow, the outline of a man, appeared on his right. The antagonist forced Jonathan to back away to gain a better stance, but in doing so he exposed his rear. The shadow lunged towards him undeterred by the precarious path or the tempestuous weather. It did not seem to suffer the same debilitations that dogged Jonathan. He fired, the recoil of the shotgun pushing him off balance. He fell again, and frantically scrambled in desperation to retreat while vainly trying to cover his person from further attacks. The dark form touched him for a moment and sent a shuddering chill through his whole body that defied the cold of the storm in its intensity. The lament reached inward, intrusively provoking doubt. Jonathan dropped the shotgun and lost sight of the weapon as the light faded to inadequacy, masking any chance of recovering it in the swell of unnatural darkness. He reached out for the tree and pulled himself upright, empathically and involuntarily drawing a trace of resolve from the touch of this natural behemoth. Life pushed back the insidious despondency for the briefest of moments giving Jonathan a fleeting bolstering inclination to act. His mind cleared to take stock of his situation. Searching the darkness, he quickly realised that he had no choice. There was little hope of recovering the weapon. He could not see his attacker. If he stayed, he would die. Jonathan ran. The dark adversary was not yet ready to attack again and lost its advantage.

Jonathan thrashed through the bushes. He slipped again and again on the uncertain path and blundered through a gap in the fence out into the open meadows bordering the estate. He hesitated for a moment and then continued his exodus, knowing with certainty that the thing that attacked him was on his trail. He needed to get back to the house – to warn Jason and the Major – to protect Harriet, Stephanie, and Jamie. However, the force of the gales dragged him in the wrong direction. He could only hope that his companions had heard the shots. Darke's minion was coming as Jonathan fought in desperation against the fury of the weather to find

his way back. He was turned over and over by the storm and thrown across the blanket of white to become a swirl of motion lost amidst the other churns of agitation whipped up by this chaotic squall.

Jonathan could not be sure if his pursuer had given up or turned his attention to the others, but he had to find a way to reach the house. Every thought was for those who relied on him. His will drove him to try in spite of the fury of the storm. Harriet was there! Stephanie and Jamie! Jason and the Major! The snow filled Jonathan's whole view, absolute in its efforts to keep him from finding the boundary that marked the estate, let alone the house. He crawled and clambered over the snow in the direction he believed was right. Any hint of his previous passing had quickly been consumed by the continuous snowfall. Worse, he had lost all sense of direction as his head spun against the repeated barrage. Despair reached out to touch his heart deeper than any cold could penetrate. Darke's agent would reach the house. He would find Harriet, Stephanie... and Jamie. He would kill them and consume their essence all in the name of that fiend. Jonathan had failed. He had never been strong enough to protect those he loved. The night consumed the last of the day and as the light faded to absolute darkness, the anguish of hopelessness tore a hole in Jonathan's waning resolve. He grasped for any stimulus to shake this creeping and debilitating doubt. The ache in his exposed finger became intense. He focused on that discomfort. The pain reached into his despair and drew him back to the here and now.

The wind tore up the looser top layer of snow blanketing the meadows and washed Jonathan in a painful powdery residue that clung to his ailing form, but it also served to camouflage him against anything that might be inclined towards scrutiny.

Jonathan almost let go of the despondent impression as something rising from within his own psyche until he realised his mistake. It was not fuelled by his emotions. The

feeling was provoked from something else. Jonathan saw him – standing there on the periphery of the wooded area of the estate. He was seething darkness and loathing, pulsing with hatred that welled up from some place that was no longer human beyond the pretence of its outer skin. The man looked emaciated, bones touching the thin layer of skin on an exposed unshaved, unwashed face. His eyes were wide and devoid of colour, a dead inky blackness that betrayed a hint of the essence of the one within. Dull grey hair was matted to the skull under the wash of snow, but it did not stir in the intensity of the wind. He was so pale. His clothing was dark and inadequate in defiance of weather no mortal could withstand with such careless covering. Darke's minion stood there, following movements stimulated by the belligerent elements and leaving his prey with one conclusion. He did not... could not possibly see Jonathan amidst this unsettled backdrop.

The dark form shifted position and followed the edge of the fence through which its prey had fled. Darke's agent had given Jonathan a direction on which to focus, restoring his sense of balance in spite of the debilitating cold. The emanation of despair had permitted him to find a way back. He clung to that focal point as if his life depended on it. This was a night without hope, but only if Jonathan lay down in the snow and gave in.

LUCIFER'S CHILD

Life is not as complex as death. Death is not near as complicated as penance, or if you like, as divine retribution. The problem with being immortal in the aftermath of having died was punishment, the application of which could be taken a little too far. Transitioning as a spirit made little difference to perception. The mind still comprehended a tangible authenticity played out in a very real way. Time became unbearable. Divine truth was anything but when ending up on the wrong side of an afterlife that did not bear resemblance to any conception that people imagined. The omnipotent myth was a concern here – knowing all, seeing all, being all... well, that just wasn't exactly true. The blueprint for humanity had to come from somewhere – flaws included. All knowing and all seeing was a matter of perspective and required concentration. Wanting to know also made being interested a prerequisite. Longevity had the potential to make one decidedly unconcerned with the minutiae of existence, consigning more and more to that category of disinterest each and every day when the measure of time ceased to be a factor. God just wasn't tuned in to every little snippet of this or any other reality. He wrote it down so that he wouldn't have to remember. There wasn't exactly a single manual for dealing with it all. Subjectively, there were an extraordinary number of handbooks, edicts, stone tablets, astrological signs, intonations, olfactory sensations, wave resonances, scribbles, and a bewildering myriad of other mediums that gave the gist of what was required, but unless you were a deity, pulling it all together was akin to a shot into an infinite dark while standing on one foot in a reality that had no sense of direction as you scraped the verge of a black hole that was also boundless. God left the universe to get on with matters of existence and remained aloof. He was a symbol of creation, stepping in if the need arose, and only then when something stirred his interest while occasionally picking a random moment to provide the hint of a miracle just to keep things interesting. Life and death had its own bureaucracy to

take care of the everyday matters and no one did administrative oversight better than a primordially interactive civilised approach to *Heaven* and *Hell* derived in a past that knew too little about an endgame to be sure of ever getting it right. When you took linear time out of the equation, the possibilities were endless but so too was the potential for something to go wrong, without really being sure if an erroneous happenstance was not the intention of some divine plan all along. It was akin to the proverbial chicken and the egg with brief flashes of luck thrown in for good measure so that one or the other didn't end up as an omelette, poached or scrambled. The chicken in this scenario was always going to be viewed as an egg in an effort to keep the universe ticking over... or not.

Caine had a long time to ponder on the question of existence and being firmly entrenched in an afterlife. The world had moved on. Millennia had passed him by, and *Hell* lost its propensity to make him feel the weight of anything but the tedium of perpetual waiting. He was seen as humanity's first murderer, but in truth he could not remember the significance of the crime in relation to time. He had been made to replay it over and over again in a tragic regression that was supposed to instil remorse, but all it taught him was to be bitter and to become immune to the essence of violence. In the end, the nuances of the memory had been taken from him by the passage of time and through an act of charity on the part of his brother, Abel. A perception of eternity had done nothing to make forgiveness enough. Abel may have absolved Caine, but he existed in a place where death had a transitional and less fulfilling meaning. How easy it was to forgive when you could look down on a place that was little more than a reflection of a prison. At least when the vassals of *Hell* were there to punish him, they showed an interest. When they left him to his own devices and the tedium that followed, this place finally became unbearably dull. Abel had given him a parting gift – a promise that he would do him a

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By William Anthony Shea

TALES FROM A DARKLING POOL

(Author's Preferred Text)

RETURN TO A DARKLING POOL

A DARKLING POOL AGAIN

BEYOND A DARKLING POOL

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*NYR = Not Yet Released.

By L Shea

IMMORAL DAWN
DE CORK BOIs (The Cork Boys)
DEAD TO ME (De Many Deaths of Michaleen)

*NYR = Not Yet Released.

The *Darkling Pool* pours out from the mind of William Anthony Shea and over the *verge* to herald a new beginning in this sixth instalment of insightful tales.

The tales resonate in moments of true horror and wonder extending a macabre influence out into a myriad of realities. They follow threads from the past and walk new paths.

Subtle sensations intermingled with thoughtful words enter an unguarded mind through whispering dreams. They unveil secrets to those strong enough to accept new truths amidst primal fears stirred through curiosity...

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