

England was just as dark and overcast as Blake had always heard it would be. He walked down the steps from the plane to the tarmac and was immediately cloaked in a cold fog that swirled around his head. It was an obscenely thick fog and landing the plane in these conditions must have been a challenge. He brushed his hands past his face, but that only stirred the mist before him, replacing one fog with more fog. A string of street lamps in the distance created small globes of light in the mist that marked a stretch of road running roughly right to left. It was quiet, with only the sound of Blake's heels scraping on the hard ground as he approached the barely lit street. Darkness and shadow surrounded him. The fog thoroughly blanketed the sky, blotting out the stars entirely. The moon could barely penetrate enough to form a soft glow in the fog over his head. The fog ended abruptly, bordered by the street while behind him, the brilliantly lit airport had faded entirely into the fog, but even as dark as the fog had been, nothing around him was as dark as what he saw on the other side of the road. He peered across the street and thought he saw something shift in the inky blackness, but he hoped, as he clenched his fists, that it was only his imagination getting away from him.

The sound of his footsteps ended as he reached the edge of the road and came to a stop before crossing. The fog was little more than a thin mist around him, but a heavy blanket of clouds still blacked out the sky. The vague scent of jet fuel had gradually faded and was replaced with the dank musk of old decaying vegetation. Blake recognized the fetid odor of a rotting swamp. He had met Destiny in just such a putrid wetland. A chorus of crickets rose to serenade the night across the street. That too reminded him of the bayou. The roar of the jets was a forgotten memory. Blake turned around to see the silent airport, but all he saw was the dark fog reflecting the dim light of the street lamps.

He stepped out onto the road and wondered why there weren't more vehicles travelling down it to get to or from the airport. Even as the thought still echoed in his mind, headlamps appeared at the far end of the road, but they were still far enough away for him to cross safely. The damp ground reflected the headlamps in a long streak of light that would have made a bleak and terrifying painting. Blake shivered as the hackles on the back of his neck stiffened. He stepped out onto the road, wondering why he felt so apprehensive, but it was an instinctive feeling that he couldn't shake. He told himself that this was just a road and that was just a car that was nowhere near him in a country that did not know who he was, yet his bones quaked and his skin turned cold.

A cat screeched from deep within the darkness across the street. He might have stopped and waited for the car to pass, but the crickets beckoned him onward. He answered their call by stepping forward, but his shoes stuck to the road. The wet asphalt should have been slick, but instead, he felt the soles of his shoes stick to the shiny black surface. He pulled hard to separate his shoe from the road top. It felt like he had stepped on gum, except that it felt like the whole road was made of gum. He pulled harder, but that only served to fasten his forward shoe to the sticky asphalt. Each step took more strength than the step before it, and the headlamps were bearing down upon him.

Something was wrong. He'd seen enough magic to know when something wasn't the way it should be, and this wasn't natural. He lit a small ball of fire to see the road better. The road reflected his fire and blinded his eyes, but he had seen enough to see that he was walking across a pool of tar. His front foot sunk into the black muck as his rear foot pulled out with a resounding pop. The headlamps were nearly on top of him.

The thick tar gripped his shoes and the approaching vehicle wasn't slowing. He sprayed fire onto the tar to soften it, but that only made it stickier. His shoe sunk even further into the softer tar until it was so deep that he pulled out a bare foot with his shoe and sock remaining stuck in the black goo.

The headlamps were on him. Blake fell to the ground and felt the rush of the air as the lights flew over him, but there was no vehicle attached to the lights. He was stuck in the tar and could barely raise his head to see what had passed over him. The tar's fragrance filled his nose and mouth and felt like it would stick to his taste buds as it had stuck to his shoes. The lights stopped a short way down the road and Blake clearly saw two specters glaring at him. He wished now that he knew more about spiritual creatures, because he was sure that they were some kinds of ghosts. Something inside him, like an

instinctual memory, told him they might be wraiths. He had never believed in ghosts before, but that was before he met the one guarding the safe.

The wraiths returned and floated over him. A woman's voice, with a sweet Scottish brogue, said, "You're a gey stubborn young laddie. Ye shouldn'a come this far."

Blake got a better look at the two apparitions as they floated over the tar. They were much more human looking than the specter guarding the safe. The one who had spoken to him had a pretty face framed in flowing red and black hair, but her body was merely wisps of smoke with a light burning where her heart should be.

A deep man's voice rumbled next to her, "Ach. He's nothin' but trouble, 'n' I canna say that he looks so young to me. Let me murdurr 'im 'n' be done with it."

"No," the woman said, "Deep doon in 'is heart, he's still one o' us, but he's not our kin 'n' he canna stay here."

The man poked Blake with a wispy finger. "Did ye hear that laddie? I dinnae ken if ye truly be one of us, bit only our kin be allowed here. You hasta go. Go now 'n' don't ye ne'er come back or mibbie I'll take me own advice next time."

Blake couldn't move. His legs, arms, and face were stuck in the tar.

"Did ye nah hear me?" the wraith bellowed. "I said to git out o' here!"

The harder Blake pushed, the deeper he stuck into the tar.

"Get up! Get up! Get up!"

The wispy apparitions popped out of Blake's vision and instead of being stuck in the tar, he found himself collapsed on the ground just inside the doorway leading out of the airport. A man in a leather bomber jacket growled at him, "Get up you wanker!"

A small girl pointed at Blake and asked her mother, "Is he okay?" Her mother took her by the hand and pulled her away.

Blake climbed unsteadily to his feet, unsure how he had gotten himself to this point.