

BLOODLINES

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Brick Cave
Film Festival 

A 2019 Brick Cave Film Festival Category

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A Brick Cave Film Festival Category

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Daniel groaned.

His head throbbed, a steady tempo in each temple that spread behind the eyes. His thoughts were hazy, caught between addled dream and the rise of a harsh reality. He forced his eyes open, strained against what little morning light made it past the heavy curtains. He was naked, in a massive bed not his own and uncertain how he'd gotten there. The only thing he could be sure of was his mother had drugged him.

While that alone was enough to send his mind reeling into anger and betrayal, he had no idea what else had been to him. Worse, whatever she'd given him was still causing him to hallucinate. The dark room was highlighted by a sheen of pale blue light along the walls and corners, brightened along the lines in a small spots that grew and retreated along the way.

Daniel tried to sit up and sucked in a breath at the pain. His chest and back felt on fire. He threw off the satin sheets, slipped from bed and headed for the curtains. He let in enough light to see fresh tattoos across his chest in a wide band of strange symbols. They resembled letters, like a fantasy language out of a movie. By the stinging on his back, he could only assume they stretched all the way around.

“What the fuck,” he whispered. His mind swam with questions, not the least of which was, “How could she do this to me?”

He felt angry, violated and betrayed. He gripped the curtain in a fist.

A glance outside revealed a wide balcony several stories up. By the look of the building across the way, he was somewhere downtown. He could hear distant voices down the hall beyond the entrance. Whoever they were, he didn't want anyone to know he was awake yet. A cursory check of his body revealed no injuries, no bruises or track marks – nothing wrong but the tattoos.

His mind was another issue.

He ignored the slow-moving light show and studied his surroundings. The bedroom was bigger than the entire apartment he and his mother shared. There was a single nightstand, a chest at the foot of the bed, a pillowed chair with folded clothes, a pair of sneakers beneath, and the double doors of a closet. Large landscape paintings hung upon the walls, framed in gold and silver beneath a swirling of symbols in cerulean glow. If he didn't feel the need to hurry out of there, he might've started looking

for things to take. Instead he tried to ignore the pain and mental anguish and rushed to get dressed.

The clothes and shoes weren't his but were all the right sizes. As he pulled on the jeans, Daniel tried to recall everything that'd happened before he blacked out.

There had been a knock at their door, as his mother handed him an open soda can. He'd been sitting on the couch watching TV. It was the only place to sit and doubled as his bed. From the corner of his eye, he'd seen his mother talking with the landlord. Daniel hadn't cared what was in the manila envelope he'd passed to her or about whatever deal his mother had been making to get them caught up with the rent.

If she didn't spend all our money on heroin, I wouldn't have to steal just to eat.

Daniel paused at the unusual thought. He was angry with her, but the sudden disgust toward his mother surprised him. He was all too aware of her faults yet loved her enough to stay. He'd never felt such revulsion for her as he did in that single moment. Then just as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone – like it wasn't even his own.

He pulled the shoes on and began tying, tried to remember more.

Whatever drugs she'd given him started kicking in as a second man entered their apartment. He'd been older, if his gray hair was any indication, and wore an expensive looking suit. Tall and thin, he had a sneer like his nose had been assaulted. One slow blink to the next, and the older man had been seated on the coffee table across from Daniel. He'd leaned far forward, studying Daniel with bright green eyes. Daniel had tried but could no longer stay awake. The last thing he recalled was the old man's hand on his knee.

Whatever deal his mother had made this time must have involved Daniel and the old man. It wouldn't be the first time someone had drugged and abused him. That was when he was small and weak, too young to defend himself. That it could happen to him now made him feel like a helpless child again. The thought of his mother letting it happen, though, sickened him to his core. He'd long given up on the idea that she was supposed to protect him. But this?

Daniel shook his head. He couldn't go back. And he couldn't stay here.

Two of the male voices outside were getting closer. Daniel finished tying the new sneakers. All of the clothes were new, with no trace of his old ones. He got up and went for the balcony. The double glass doors were unlocked, let in a rush of cold air as he hurried for the stone railing. He was four stories up with no easy way down. The only escape he could see was a neighboring balcony.

He ignored the dangerous height and hopped the short distance across. It took another two balconies before he found unlocked doors. He quietly slipped inside and snuck past a sleeping couple. While he was sure he still hallucinated, there were no lights in their room. Out in the hallway, he could see a commotion taking shape by an open door. Men in dark suits and glasses were talking into headsets. They began knocking on other doors, as if searching for him.

Daniel quickly turned the other way and headed for the stairwell.

* * *

Daniel slipped out of the hotel lobby unnoticed and headed for a bus stop. Without a phone, money or ID, getting back to the west side would be a problem. He planned to crash at a friend's place, to give himself time to think. He had no intention of ever going home again, and school was the last thing on his mind.

He kept his head down as he walked. He wasn't a big guy or particularly fit. He'd learned the hard way it was best to avoid eye contact, keep going no matter what. If someone asked for change, he didn't have any. If someone asked to use his phone, he didn't have one. He'd never be rude, just succinct and wouldn't stop. So it was more than a little surprising when he came to an angry halt at the touch of a homeless man's hand at his pant leg.

"Buddy," the guy asked, "got any change?"

The man was seated against a building, where shade kept him from the Phoenix sun. He held a cardboard sign in one hand and had reached out to Daniel with the other. He wasn't unusually dirty, had even seemed friendly, but the revulsion at being touched gripped Daniel with sudden outrage.

"Don't touch me!" he yelled down at the man and slapped the can from his hand. He raised a fist as the feeling left him.

“Oh, fuck. Shit, man, I’m sorry.” Daniel didn’t wait for a reply. He quickly turned and left, only looking back for one more, “Sorry.”

A tirade of curses followed after, as the man scrambled to pick up his change. “You think you’re better than me?” he shouted.

“No,” Daniel said to no one and turned a corner. “I really don’t.”

What’s wrong with me?

Drugs and trauma aside, Daniel had no explanation for his behavior. He’d never been quick to anger or been so repulsed by an everyday occurrence.

He was still hallucinating, though the lights and symbols he saw above the surface of things were at best inconsistent. They spun around some people’s phones or jewelry but not everyone’s. They marked some buildings like graffiti but not all of them. They were on billboards and street ads, some cars and business windows. He’d never tripped on hard drugs before but somehow imagined it’d be more even.

When Daniel arrived at the nearest bus stop, he reached out to touch one on the ad board. The blue light formed a perfect circle of the strange letters. It even moved in a slow rotation. When he felt eyes on him, he pulled his hand away and focused on an older woman among those waiting. She had the look of a mother, someone who might be more willing to help.

“Excuse me,” he said to her quietly and approached, “my phone and wallet were stolen. I’m just trying to get home. Could you spare two dollars for the bus?”

She rolled her eyes on response. “Do I look like a bank? Use a payphone. Call collect.” She looked him up and down. “I’m sure someone will come for you.”

“I – I don’t,” Daniel began to say and swallowed. “I don’t have anyone to call.”

“Hmph.” She looked back down at her phone, as if to say that wasn’t her problem.

“I got you,” another said. He was about the same age as Daniel and had been watching him paw the sign. “Rough night?”

“Something like that.” Daniel moved to stand beside him. He was an average looking guy, clean with no tattoos. The only thing that made him stand out from the others was he wasn’t absorbed by his phone or wearing headphones. “Thanks. I really appreciate it. I’m Daniel.”

“Jake. And no problem.” A few moments later, he asked in a low voice, “What bloodline you from?”

Daniel looked perplexed. If it was something to do with gangs, he’d never heard of it before.

“Sorry?”

“You know,” Jake said. “What family? Woodward, Forester, Oakley...”

The bus pulled up to the curb as Daniel asked, “Is that a video game reference? I don’t really play all that much.”

Jake raised a brow but eventually shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

Once Jake paid for them both, he took a seat in the back. He nodded Daniel over and pulled a phone from his backpack. Daniel reluctantly sat beside him. He would’ve preferred to sit alone but thought he owed Jake some company at least.

“You believe this?” Jake asked and held up the screen.

It was an article about the governor dying in his sleep. Normally he wouldn’t care, but the picture immediately drew Daniel’s attention. It was the older man from last night. The picture was somewhat distorted, but there was no mistaking him.

Daniel would never forget that face.

“What a joke. I mean, I know we didn’t do it. So how the hell does he end up dead? It’s gotta be bullshit, right?”

“I guess,” Daniel replied, still stunned by the revelation his molester was the governor. “What’s up with the ears and glowing eyes.”

Jake put the phone away with a snort. “You’re messing with me,” he said. “You from out of town or something?”

“Nope. Born and raised.”

“Well, I know everyone at Thistlewood, and you don’t go there.” Jake had been keeping his voice low and was now actively looking around to see if anyone was listening. “So you’re either a hedge or...”

“Or?” Daniel asked, both amused and annoyed at the whole conversation.

“Or your day’s about to get fucking weird.”

Jake reached into his backpack and pulled out a wooden sphere that fit snugly into his palm. It had been smoothed and polished to a deep brown shine. It was also surrounded by blue light, all lines and sharp angles rather than the fantasy letters. It reminded him of a twenty-sided dice. Bright pinpoints ran along

the edges.

“What do you see?” Jake asked.

Daniel sighed. “Listen, I’m not really in the mood for games. I was drugged last night, and I’m still seeing shit.” Jake gave a persistent look. “It’s a wooden ball.”

“And?” When Daniel forced his attention out the window, Jake added, “You don’t see any blue light around it?” Daniel’s expression completely changed. He wasn’t hallucinating? “I fucking knew it. You’re a potential.” Jake put the sphere away. “How the hell have you gone this long without being noticed?”

What fuck is going on?

He didn’t feel high, but he’d been in a fog since he woke. If the drugs weren’t making him see the blue lights, then what were they? He rubbed absently at the pain across his chest. Should he tell Jake about the tattoo? He had no reason to trust him, other than Jake clearly knew things Daniel did not.

Jake had pulled his backpack onto his lap and fully unzipped a compartment all the way around. It opened up to reveal two panels with rows of small see-through pockets. The left side held items, from twigs to leaves, metal and crystal rods to lengths of various smoothed stones and numerous of herbs. The right side held powders, what looked like ash and sand, a variety of types of dirt and many others of assorted colors.

“Here’s where shit gets real,” Jake said with the seriousness of someone about to break the law. “What you’re seeing, the blue lights, is magic. I’m gonna prove it, but once I do, we gotta bounce. Your life’s in danger, and you don’t even know it.”

I liked it better when I thought I was hallucinating.

“Great, so I’m not crazy,” Daniel said. “You are. I appreciate the ride –”

Daniel got up to move seats, but Jake held him back.

“Just gimme a minute,” he said. “If you don’t believe me, fine, but I’m trying to help you.” He rested the backpack on his knees against the seat in front of them so that both of his hands were free. He pulled a twig from a pocket on the left side. “Now, I’m just gonna break it all down for you real simple. Magic is real.” He placed the twig in his left hand and took a pinch of dark earth. “Elves and every magical creature you ever heard of are real, but the elves are the real piece of work.” He slowly sprinkled the dirt over the twig. “Those assholes have been running things

from the shadows for thousands of years.”

Anger rose up within Daniel without warning. He made a fist and would've struck Jake had he not stopped himself in time. While he tried to reason the sudden well of emotion, it fled in the next breath. Confused and concerned for his mental health, he unclenched before Jake noticed.

“They use magic, money and drugs to control us,” Jake said and added a pinch of salt to his left palm. “Some of us from specific bloodlines have magic too, though much, much weaker.” He took a small dried leaf and began to crumble it atop the pile. “Elves can do some crazy shit with just their minds. We have to rely on earth magic. You know, everyday shit just lying around. The trick,” he said and took a bit of ash between his fingers, “is knowing how much to use and in what order.”

Jake let the ash fall, and the pile erupted into green flame. He immediately put it out with his right hand so as not to draw attention. The bus driver had already been eyeing them in the rearview mirror. When he opened his hands, the materials were gone. He wiped the debris away. There were no burns on his palms.

Daniel shook his head. “This can't be real. How did you do that? How can magic be real and no one knows about it?”

“People do know,” Jake replied and began closing the backpack, “more than you think. It's kept secret, obviously, and forbidden for us. Magicians live in hiding, but we do what we can to help. We can see through their illusions, which helps avoid getting caught.” He threw the pack over a shoulder. “Potentials, people who can see, they're noticed real young and taken in for their own protection. That's how I don't get you being as old as you are and not knowing.” He nodded toward the door as the bus stopped. “We gotta get out here, before a Hunter shows up. I set off an alarm with that spell for sure.”

Daniel looked outside to a street sign. They were barely in the avenues. There was something about the way Jake had spoken, so certain and afraid, that made him want to be elsewhere in a hurry. He got up and headed for the exit. As he went down the stairs, the bus's engine died and all the lights on the dash went out. The driver frowned and turned the key, but nothing happened.

“Shit,” Jake said right behind Daniel, “go. Go now!”

Daniel started to move briskly, while Jake flat out ran. It

lent true urgency to the moment, coaxing Daniel to catch up. They were half a block away when a black SUV screeched to a halt behind the bus. A tall, lean man in a black suit entered the bus. He stepped out a moment later and locked eyes with Daniel, who had stopped to look back. Daniel had hoped it was all bullshit, the existence of magic, this supposed Hunter from out of nowhere. The man held his left arm up and pulled the right back, at the same time a bow of emerald light appeared in his hands.

If it's magic, Daniel wondered, can people on the bus see it? Is anyone filming him with their phone?

Jake grabbed hold of Daniel's arm and pulled him from harm's way, as a magic arrow sped past where his head would have been. The shaft of green light struck a brick building across the way. It didn't damage the brick, but the explosion of beryl touched nearby bushes and weeds. Any life the magic touched shriveled to black and died.

"Let's go," Jake growled and dragged a dumbfounded Daniel away.

* * *

They stood before a chain-link fence around an abandoned lot. They'd ran for blocks, dodging in and out of alleys with specific markers, before Jake was satisfied they were safe. It was another four blocks before they had reached the empty property. It was roughly the size of a shopping center, with nothing but dirt and debris where there once might have been a building and parking lot.

"This is gonna feel strange," Jake said and pulled the gate open enough to slip under the chain holding it shut. "You just have to trust me."

Daniel made a face like this was all a waste of time. There was nothing on the other side of that fence worth going in for. It was stupid to even bother. He had much better things to do.

"Come on," Jake persisted. "You can do it."

Daniel sighed. "This some kinda test?" He eyed the mud and litter on the other side, wondered which pile might poke him with a dirty needle if he went in. "Cuz it feels like a stupid test."

"I know exactly what it feels like. And I know you don't wanna come in here. You're not supposed to want to," Jake added. "That's the whole point. Just sack up, and fucking do it

anyway.”

Daniel tried but couldn't. It was like his brain worked against him. He ducked his head and reached a hand through, but his feet wouldn't follow. In the end, Jake pulled him past the gate. In that instant, the lot empty lot changed to a busy apartment building. Like a veil had fallen away, he no longer saw the illusion. Though there were dozens of people outside going about their business, some even watching them enter, Daniel hadn't heard a single one from outside.

“How...”

Jake grinned. “I know, right? This,” he said with a sweeping arm toward the building, “is Thistlewood. We're totally safe here.”

A girl in her twenties came toward them with books in her arm. By the look on her face, she wasn't happy to see them.

“Why the fuck did you bring a dimbo here?” she asked and stared Jake down. She completely ignored Daniel, as if he wasn't worth her acknowledging. “Do you know how many alarms you just set off?”

“The hell is a dimbo?” Daniel couldn't help but feel insulted.

“It's fine,” Jake replied. “I can explain. I'm taking him to enrollment.”

She looked Daniel up and down, still didn't approve. “That's on your ass then.”

As she walked away, Daniel asked again, “Dimbo?”

Jake led him toward the building. “Dimbo, Dimmy, Dimsum, Dimbledore. It's what we call people without magic. Like a dim bulb, they don't burn as bright. Ya know? Don't worry about Sasha. You belong here, man.”

Once they were in the office, Daniel passed a simple test that proved he could see magic. He could tell by everyone's reaction that he was somewhat of a marvel. That anyone could have made it to his age without drawing attention seemed impossible to them. There were recruiters everywhere with an eye out for potentials to make sure this very thing never happened. Despite the fuss, it only took half an hour before his paperwork was processed and Daniel was enrolled as a student.

“You'll start with the basics,” Jake had told them on the way to Daniel's new room. Apparently the school provided housing as well. “It ain't like high school, with grades and shit. It's about things you have to know, things you wanna know, and

along the way you figure out what you wanna do to contribute.”

All the while, ever since entering the school, Daniel has been bothered by an urge to call his mother. Despite what she'd done, he wanted to know she was all right. While it made sense in his head, it felt like another one of those welling emotions not his own, like some external force was causing him to suddenly care again.

“Any chance I can use a phone?” he asked and scratched at his new tattoo.

“Sorry, man.” Jake stood in the doorway as Daniel looked about his sparse new bedroom. “Rules and all that. No phones on campus. No leaving for the first week.”

“I'm stuck here?”

Jake shrugged. “It's for your protection and ours. Ya know, just in case you're nuts or some shit.”

Daniel laughed at what was intended as a joke but didn't really feel all that persuaded.

“What if I am?” he asked. “Do I get kicked out or killed?”

Jake stood in the doorway with both hands on either side, added to the prisoner vibe Daniel was feeling.

“Nah, you just get your memory wiped and sent on your way.” Jake tilted his head to one side, like a half shrug. “Guess that's why we call 'em potentials. Not everyone works out, ya know? Anyway, I got places to be. I'm sure I'll see you around campus.” He turned to leave when a thought struck. “There's a party planned for this weekend. The heads of every bloodline in Arizona are flying in for it. I'm sure everyone will get a kick out of you.”

A nervous twinge of excitement sparked Daniel's attention.

“What's the occasion? I know it isn't me.”

“Nah,” Jake replied with a short laugh. “It's the governor's death. Dude was an Elf Lord, pretty big deal. Half the west coast is from his tree. What he wouldn't do to get all those people in the same room or even know who they are.” Jake laughed again. “And all it took was him dyin'. Too bad he'll never see it.”

“Heh. Okay,” Daniel said, “I guess I'll see you there.”

For the first time since all this craziness had started, he actually began to feel a small measure of joy.

The week went by quickly.

One day Daniel knew nothing of magic, and the next he was being inundated with its history, the practical and proper use, its societal and economic impacts and his place in a new world. There was so much to learn, so many people eager to meet him, that there'd been little time for anything else. It was only at night, before sleep, when he gave any thought to his mother and her betrayal. He imagined he might one day forgive her but not for a long time. The tattoo he kept hidden was a constant reminder of what she'd done.

The party was held in a clubhouse behind the main building. It was large enough for fifty to comfortably gather and converse. It was where all the well-dressed elders were escorted, while everyone else remained outside by the pool. There was music, barbecues and buffet tables for the students. Daniel was about to put together a plate of food when Jake surprised him from behind.

"There he is. No time for that. Come on," he said and nodded toward the clubhouse. "There's people inside just dying to meet you."

Daniel laughed for some reason but passed it off as being nervous. He followed Jake passed the guarded doors and into the relative quiet of a warded room. He supposed the magic was to keep out the noise of music and students partying. It was still somewhat noisy, though more of a low murmur.

While not everyone was old, as the term elder might imply, they did all seem to Daniel to come from money. He certainly had never seen so many suits and fancy dresses in one place, other than television. He immediately noticed all their jewelry and how they spoke to one another, pleasant but guarded. They each came across as highly educated, how he imagined people who'd gone to college might behave. They were curious but polite, even respectful, as he was introduced. Though he was sure they meant well, it left him feeling like an oddity. It seemed to Daniel at times like they were watching his every move.

Despite their clothes and education, their wealth and social standing, a sense of superiority overcame Daniel's senses. He couldn't help but see them as insects. They were foolish and absurd, like children playing dressing up, pretending to be adults and getting it all wrong. His growing disgust became anger, as if their presence was an insult. Unlike before, when these strange

emotions would overcome him, they didn't just vanish.

They took all control.

Daniel's eyes began to glow as his conscious was pushed aside. He felt his hands move, heard his voice speak, but none of it was him. He'd become a passenger in his own body, able to see, hear and feel everything around him. It was a nightmare come to life, and all he could do was watch on from a recess in his mind.

"You're all fools," he told them, and his voice brought them to utter silence. He pointed toward the childish markings of magic upon the walls. "You think these spells make you safe? I'm going to enjoy killing each and every one of you." He looked upon them like a god among mortals. "You've been a thorn in my side for generations. To think you're all undone by such an amateurish ruse..."

"Were we though?" a middle-aged man asked.

Daniel waved a hand toward him, full expected to break his neck with the gesture. When nothing happened, he narrowed his eyes at the man. A closer look at the spells made no difference. They were meaningless wards. They were... a distraction.

"What's the meaning of this?"

Men and women pulled away rugs from the hardwood floor. Far more complex spellwork had been crafted there, wall to wall.

"No one fell for your ruse," a woman said. "You fell for ours."

Daniel's body was restrained, despite the incredible power he could feel within him. He was shackled hand and foot, spellwork on top of spellwork. Without magic to fight back, the spirit in charge of Daniel was as helpless as any teen.

It's him, Daniel knew and felt the tattoo on his chest burn. The governor.

"I'm sorry, man," Jake said. "I know you're still in there, but there's no other way. We can't kill him, and there's no locking him up." He let out a sigh. Daniel could see he genuinely cared. "It's gotta be you. You're his prison."

"He'll keep your body alive," the man said, as Daniel's body fought and snarled to get free, "but there's no escape for either of you."

"I'll kill you," the elf spirit promised. "My brethren will come for me. None of you will be spared!"

"It has to be this way," the woman said to Daniel, ignoring the elf, "for now."

Daniel fought for control, screamed as he exerted every bit

of will he could muster. The glow in his eyes faded for a moment, just long enough for him to speak.

“I understand,” he said through gritted teeth.

Pushed back into the dark recess, he once again lost all control.

Everyone had been leaving, until only a few remained. Daniel’s body was forced to its knees, further chained to the floor.

“This is temporary,” the woman assured him, touched his chin with a gentle hand. “We’ll find a way to free you. This, I swear.”

Jake was last to leave. He gave a final nod in farewell, as Daniel’s body looked back with seething hatred.

The doors closed to total darkness.

About Author J.A. Giunta

Joe is an Fantasy author with numerous short stories and books published in both paperback and ebook. He has a B.A. in English from Arizona State and has worked in the IT industry for over 15 years. He now writes novels full-time at home.

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