

# **The Lost Fae Realms**

**Caroline Barnard-Smith**



A Little Hoot Press Edition

**The Lost Fae Realms**  
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<http://www.carolinebarnardsmith.co.uk>

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When I awoke, I had forgotten everything. I was a newborn babe struggling to understand my surroundings, squinting against the light. My skin was on fire, saturated in searing blue flame that engulfed and devoured. For a long time all I knew was pain. Eventually there was noise amidst the chaos. Ringing, pounding rhythms that reverberated inside my head. I screamed and my mouth filled with dirt.

I could have lain in my grave for a day or a century, time was lost to me. When I rose it was involuntary, as if the earth itself had rejected me. It bore me up and pushed me forth, out into the world.

The pain lapsed, the flames cooled and I could see again. I could remember. I looked around the place of my death, of my rebirth. I balked against the dank stench of humanity, thick in my nostrils, and cried until I was hoarse.

The plan had failed. We were a small group when we went into the ground, my siblings and I. Now I was the only survivor. I searched the ground again and again. We had buried ourselves side by side, so close that our fingers brushed as we relaxed into the cool earth and let time take us. Now there was no sign of them, no clue for me to follow. How had I remained when they were taken?

Once we had been a nation, a great and wise population who tended the earth and passed our knowledge down through the generations. The humans had many names for us. Fairies, elves, angels. They explained us away in folk stories. Made us tiny and inconsistent: pretty flower-tenders and wish-givers with butterfly wings and clothes spun from gossamer. None of the stories grasped our true power, our ultimate purpose. We lived both in and apart from their world, slipping from one existence to the other as easily as we breathed the air.

The humans took it all from us. Their industrial factories spewed vile filth into the air and poured foreign waste into the oceans. Our hearts grew heavy as we watched them, but we had faith the earth would prevail. The humans had to learn from their mistakes, just as all of nature's beasts learn. We rallied round them, stretched our influence to encompass and enlighten all. We waited.

We were ignored. They built motor cars and aeroplanes. They hollowed out the sacred bowels of the earth in their search for fuel. They felled the forests and killed their animal companions in numbers too great to rectify. Their hatred for themselves and for every living thing grew great and black and all-consuming. It pulsed like a living thing and lay upon the earth as thick as acrid tar until all beauty was lost.

Our home realms, so closely tied to the mortal world, began to stutter and fail. We sickened for the first time in our long lives, taking on a human dimension that terrified us. Viruses, infection, disease. Plague. These were petty mortal afflictions we had never need fear before. Now they were killing us.

When our world finally fell, swirling into the ether like fine, ashy smoke, we found ourselves trapped with the humans. Locked into a violent, brutal world against which we had no defence. That was when the last of us went into the ground. We were so few by then. We had seen our families and loved ones perish, winking out of existence as swiftly as extinguished candles. We had to continue to trust that humanity would eventually rail against its self-destructive nature. That it would cleave to the basic survival instincts inherent in all the beasts that crawl or swim upon the earth. We would go to ground until our fortunes changed. We hoped that when we rose, their world would be different. The humans would be at peace.

I woke up alone.

I shivered with cold and pressed myself against the soil, wishing to be taken back into its embrace. The earth ignored my pleas. I remained there, naked and curled into a ball, until midnight passed and an old woman stumbled across me. I gazed up at her through filmy tears. She wore multi-coloured scarves and skirts, so worn and encrusted with grime they were as rags. When she smiled down at me her teeth were broken and discoloured.

“What’s this here?” she said. “You hurt? Has someone hurt you?”

I struggled to a sitting position, aware of my nakedness for the first time. “I need clothes,” I stammered. My voice felt like a foreign, dry object in my mouth. It had been so long since I had spoken.

“Yes, yes,” the woman agreed. A breeze blew and her odour drifted down to me: sour filth and milky ruin. Thin grey hair stood out around her head in a fine, unkempt halo. She peered at me intensely, studying my face, taking in the dirt streaked along my sides and matted into my hair. With a tiny cry, I realised I was still in my fae-form and had not the strength to will myself into some semblance of humanity. My violet skin glowed against the underbrush and my pointed ears rose rebelliously from their cloak of unbrushed hair, black as the starless night.

“I know you,” the woman said. She smiled wider and her eyes shone with delight. “You’re Faeborn. One of The Shining. Yes, I know you.”

I gaped at her, unable to comprehend her knowledge of my kind. I was the last of us left, how could this crone possibly know these things? I shivered again and the woman bent to rummage in a plastic carrier bag at her side, producing a large woollen shawl with a flourish.

“Put it on,” she urged, thrusting it towards me.

I stood slowly, still unsteady on my feet, and pulled the shawl around my shoulders. It reached my knees and blew out behind me as the frayed edges caught the breeze. I smiled gratefully.

“You must come and see Jinx,” the woman said. “He’ll be happy with old Sheila when I bring him his friend. I know he will.”

“Jinx?” I was afraid to believe what the crone was saying. “My brother is alive?”

“He lives with us. He keeps us safe.”

Tears stung my eyes once more and I suddenly felt as if I would fall. My legs became numb and the breath left my body. “Take me to him,” I said. “Take me at once.”

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I cowered against the horrors the crone steered me through. They seemed to go on forever: the rows of tents and low-slung huts. The staring crowd of pale, thin faces. Children played in the filth at my feet, chasing rats the size of small dogs away with sticks. In a tent to my left, I heard the plaintive cries of a woman in labour. All around was the rich, thick smell of excrement. People crowded before pyres or large television screens, strapped to trees and sheltered beneath tarpaulin.

When we went into the ground we were in a city park, filled with trees and the tinkling sounds of a large fountain at its centre. The surrounding city had been vast and impressive, punctuated by corporate buildings and banking centres that towered over all. Now the buildings circling the tents were blackened and boarded up. Some still smoked with the remnants of fire. Broken windows glittered in the myriad lights of the bonfires below them, leering like cracked teeth in dark, withered mouths.

“What happened here?” I asked the crone as we made our way amongst the thronging people. “Why do you live like this?”

“You think we choose to live here?” The woman laughed, making the aged folds of skin beneath her throat quiver. “We got nowhere else to go,” she said. “They like to keep us down here, away from their sensitive eyes.”

We stopped outside the largest tent. It squatted before the unending rows, high and dark and smelling of strange, acrid incense. The woman waved me inside.

“They won’t let me in,” she said. “You go on. Tell them old Sheila found you, don’t forget! They’ll owe me for this. They’ll owe me a whole day, you’ll see.”

I nodded my thanks and ducked inside, beneath a hanging tent flap. The smoking incense drifted through the air and stung my eyes. I squinted in the darkness.

“Jinx?”

A man bustled forth from the back of the tent and stood over me, huge and glowering. “Who are you?” he demanded.

I blinked, craning my neck to see who I was talking to. He was an immense black man, a creature of sculpted muscle and cold, steely strength. I straightened my shoulders.

“I want to see Jinx,” I said. “Where’s my brother?”

The man leant forward to look at me. I saw something like awe brush his face. He snorted and shook it away. “We’ve had fakers here before,” he said. “Everyone wants to be a lost child of the fae. It won’t get you any extra credits.”

I summoned what little strength I had and stared back at the man, knowing that my oval eyes were burning with fierce, blue fire: the fire that burns within all fae. He trembled and backed away.

“Wait here.”

I nodded and pulled the flame back, grateful not to have to exert myself further. The man turned and hurried back into the darkness at the back of the tent. I pulled my shawl more tightly around myself as the breeze outside rose to a cold wind that snaked beneath the tent and wrapped itself about my bare feet. A sudden noise flared behind me, startling me and making me turn. A young woman was howling in the tent’s entrance, her face white and waxy, her entire body trembling.

“No,” she screamed at me. “It’s my turn. They know it’s my bloody turn.”

She rushed forward, her eyes blazing madly, and pushed past me into the darkness beyond. She yelped when the large black man reappeared and grasped her roughly by the shoulders.

“What’s this?” he roared. “You know the rules. You jump the queue, you lose a credit.”

The woman wilted in his arms as if she had been struck. “No,” she pleaded. “Please no. I’ve been waiting a week. It’s too long, I can’t do it.”

The man shook his head, nostrils flaring. “Get out, before I make it two credits.”

He began to push the woman backwards, out of the tent. She struggled against him, surging with renewed vigour and ugly violence.

“Fuck you, Sasha,” she screeched. “I’ll tell everyone about this. I’ll cut your fucking throat while you sleep. This isn’t fair. It isn’t fair, you fucking asshole.”

I stared, aghast at her verbal onslaught, as Sasha manhandled her from the tent and thrust her onto the ground outside. She thrashed in the dirt, tears streaking her face, ripping up fistfuls of scrubby, sodden grass. Sasha calmly turned away and let the tent flap swing closed, refusing to acknowledge the lump of earth the woman hurled at his back.

“Jinx has agreed to see you,” he said to me. “I just hope for your sake that you are who you say you are.” He studied me for several moments, perhaps watching to see if I would change my mind and flee from the tent. When I stood my ground he nodded and said, “Follow me.”

Sasha led me through an opening at the back of the tent and into a second, longer space, constructed from metal sheeting and great jagged swathes of black tarpaulin. People were seated along the sides, lying prostrate on chairs ripped out from cars and buses. The light was low and the air smoky, but a series of red blinking lights made me pause. As I studied the silent forms on either side of me, I realised that the people and the lights were as one. I turned to a young man seated on my right, a perplexing mixture of curiosity and sick horror turning inside me, and saw that the long wires gathered behind him were in fact connected to him. They trailed around his head and shoulders, squatting over him like some salivating, many-tentacled beast. The wires had been inserted into the thin skin of his forearms, spliced into his very veins. The red lights seemed to be electrical pulses of some kind. They travelled from a rotund, silver machine on the floor beside him, up into his body.

The young man quivered, a slow roll of movement that started in his pelvis and swept up his chest until his head danced against the back of his chair. It was the first sign of life he had demonstrated. He soon lapsed back against the headrest, his mouth slack and his eyes dank as two stagnant pools. I looked beyond him, to the other

motionless forms in the chairs, and saw they too were each connected to a small, blinking machine. They too were glassy-eyed and unresponsive.

Sasha turned in the middle of the room, his face outlined in the intermittent red of the electrical lights. "Come on," he said. "Can't keep Jinx waiting."

I began to follow once more, trying not to look into the pale faces of the living corpses lining my path.

At the end of the room was another opening, leading to a third space. A heavy cotton sheet hung before it, blocking the interior from view. Sasha stopped and bowed his head.

"You must enter alone," he said, waving his arm at the entrance.

"Am I expected to be afraid?" I asked him, wondering how my brother had manipulated the mortals in this way. For the first time, I considered the possibility that this man called Jinx was an imposter. Even Sasha's voice had changed before his master's threshold, from a great booming force to a worshipful hush.

"Not if you have told the truth," he replied.

I rearranged the shawl around my shoulders, swept the cotton sheet aside and ventured within.

Jinx stood, his back half-turned to me, amid a lavish collection of silk pillows and richly upholstered chairs. His skin was alarmingly dark, bronzed to a shining mahogany, and his once glossy black hair was now white as freshly fallen snow. But it was undeniably Jinx, my beloved brother, my own flesh. I cried aloud when I saw him and he turned to face me, his eyes widening with disbelief.

"Briana? I hardly dared to believe it! Have you returned to me from the dead, little sister?"

I shook my head, fresh tears rising in my eyes. "I have been in the earth all this time. I awoke just a short while ago. I thought I was alone in this place."

"As did I," Jinx laughed. He took me into his arms and held me as I wept, tenderly brushing the dirt from my hair. Eventually my tears subsided and he pulled away to cup my face with his large, smooth hands, marvelling anew at my return. "How could I have passed you by?" he said. "I searched the area of our slumber, I found no trace of our kin left."

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps the earth was unwilling to release me."

“If only she had been so fond of me,” Jinx replied. “I awoke just ten years after we went to ground. Though it might have been a hundred, the world had changed so much.”

“And not for the better.” I thought of the sights I had already witnessed, the stench of despair and decay that permeated every inch of this new world, and shuddered.

“What has happened, Jinx?”

He sighed. “That is a long and sobering tale, little sister. Let me first find you some clothes, and something to eat.”

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An hour later I was clean and my hair neatly brushed, dressed in the multi-coloured clothes I had seen so many of the humans wearing. They were fashioned from a multitude of rags, sewn together with thick, bright yarn. I curled myself into the corner of a particularly large, deep sofa in Jinx’s quarters, waiting for my brother to compose himself and begin his tale.

I didn’t dare to interrupt him as he told it, didn’t dare to take my eyes from the ashen weariness that settled over his features and the barely perceptible shaking that beset his hands. He told me of the long fall of human civilisation. How the greed of the few had destroyed the lives of the many. He described how the people, left with nothing, had begun creating makeshift shelters in city parks and wastelands. How their promised help had never come and how the shelters had become vast camps, crawling with every facet of humanity, all equal now in their desolation.

When he had finished we sat in silence for several moments. Jinx was bent forward on his chair, his hands in his lap and his head bowed, long hair covering his face. I reached out and touched his arm.

“We could never have predicted this,” I said. “Our faith in them was gravely misplaced.”

Jinx nodded sombrely.

I hesitated before asking my next question. “Jinx, what were those machines I walked past? There were people connected to them.”

At this, a faint glimmer lit the swimming darkness of Jinx’s eyes. He looked up at me and smiled. “This new world is not entirely devoid of wonders,” he said. “The machines are a human invention, naturally. They call it TWI, Total World Immersion.

When the plug junkies are jacked in, they feel as if they're in an entirely different place. They are no longer wired into a chair. They can breathe different air, can see and taste and smell as if the environment they find themselves in was real."

Jinx made the practice sound casual, as if a human hooking himself into a machine was as natural as dreaming. "Where do they go?" I wondered.

"It depends which programme is running. If you can imagine it, you can programme it. A city, a garden, a vast ship sailing the ocean. Anything is possible. This technology has both revolutionised and divided the modern world. Some humans think TWI is evil. They argue that humanity will never want to venture forth into the real world again, not when the realms of the imagination are so much richer. But I argue that these people have nothing left to venture into. What is there of the real world for them? Starvation, desperation and misery. That is all."

"So that's why you help them do it? That's why you have TWI machines here?"

"Yes."

Jinx's simple, blunt answer seemed to cut our conversation dead. I fidgeted on the sofa. "You look so full of health, Jinx," I finally said, attempting to change the subject. "When we went into the ground, we barely had the strength to conceal ourselves. How have you recovered?"

Jinx sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. "When a creature is dying, is desperate, they will evolve in order to survive. We are no different, Briana. I have learned to find beauty in things we once deemed ugly. I draw strength from these things, as once we drew strength from the ancient oak trees and the rivers."

I thought about this, trying to decide what beauty there was to be found in this world. Jinx rose to his feet and extended his hand.

"Come with me," he said. "I will show you what I mean."

I allowed him to lead me from the room, through the connecting tents and out into the camp. He did not disguise his fae-form from the people who clustered about him, stroking his hair and touching his face. He gently disengaged himself from their reaching hands and kept walking until we had passed through an opening in the high wire fence that bordered the camp.

"Why don't you hide your appearance?" I asked once we were out of sight.

Jinx looked down at me impassively, his hand still grasping mine. "They might have torn down their religions," he said, "but mortals have always looked to something bigger than themselves. It is their nature."

A sudden scream tore through the night, growing steadily louder. I whirled around to see the noise was that of a siren, blasting from a large armoured car. The heavily plated vehicle roared towards us, tearing up the street as voraciously as a lioness running down an antelope. I fell back against Jinx and stiffened as the car passed us, watching it screech into the distance on huge black tyres.

“What was that?” I said.

“It was just a police car,” Jinx said. “Nothing to be alarmed about.”

He squeezed my hand and urged me to cross the road. I did so as quickly as possible, eventually finding myself amid the burnt-out shells of the city’s tower blocks. I looked up at the sad structures with an ache in my heart.

“Do you have the strength to climb?” Jinx asked.

I was not sure that I did, but Jinx didn’t wait for my answer. He dropped my hand and leapt away, scaling the side of the building in front of us as easily as a spider negotiates his web. I watched him swing from window ledge to jutting window ledge, faster and more agile than any human. He paused when he was halfway up the side of the structure and turned to look down at me.

“Come on,” he shouted. “Follow me.”

I hesitated, but decided to attempt the climb. I jumped onto the first ledge and reached upwards for the next, finding other handholds in cracks and rusting satellite dishes as I raced to reach Jinx. To my surprise, a measure of strength returned to my limbs. I reached the top of the building with relative ease and by the time I swung myself onto the roof, exhilaration had coloured my face. Jinx stood before me on the flat surface, littered with broken glass and swirls of ashy soot. He grinned widely and beckoned.

“Over here, little sister. I will show you beauty amidst the wreckage.”

I walked to his side, the rise and fall of my breath barely disturbed by my long climb, and allowed him to turn me in the direction of the imminent sunrise. Gradually, the sun roused itself from slumber and began its slow hike into the sky.

“Now watch,” Jinx whispered beside me, his arm tight around my shoulders.

“Watch the magnificence of the breaking dawn, beautiful as it has always been. See how it washes the grey buildings with gold, erasing the filth and neglect if only for the briefest of moments.”

My breath caught in my throat as I watched the sky lighten and the long arms of the sun brush the scene before me. “You’re right,” I said. “There is still beauty in this place.”

Jinx remained silent and when I turned to look at him, his eyes were closed, his skin shining like polished onyx in the sunlight saturating him. His hair blazed fiercely about his face, imbued with its own piercing light.

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I slept most of the next day, my deep exhaustion finally catching up with me. I had lain in the earth for decades, but my expulsion had been both mentally and physically draining.

A noise roused me in the late afternoon: a stifled, rhythmic moaning that came from Jinx’s tent. I was sleeping in a smaller tent beside it, furnished with just one sofa and a collection of blankets. I lay motionless for a long time, blinking in the sunlight filtering through the tent’s thin tarpaulin, until my curiosity lit like a flame that would not be doused. I cast the blankets aside and slipped from my tent to enter the long structure leading to Jinx’s quarters.

Inside, tangled upon a deep bed swathed in silk, Jinx was making love to a mortal woman. She rose and fell against him, her loose blonde hair shining like the sun. I felt frozen to the spot. It was unheard of for a fae to copulate with mortals, the very thought of it abhorred. My shock was broken when Jinx sat up abruptly, gripping the woman’s buttocks in his hands, and cried out as he neared release. I felt sickened being privy to such an intimate act and fell back from the tent’s entrance, one hand clasped over my mouth.

I turned, intending to flee, and found Sasha standing behind me. An amused expression lightened the broad planes of his face.

“Can I help you, Briana?”

I stared up at him, unable to think of a plausible reason for my presence. His eyes darkened and he frowned, realising my discomfort.

“Perhaps you were here to try out the equipment? Jinx often uses it.”

I smiled my gratitude, relieved to have an excuse provided for me. “Yes, Sasha. I am interested in the TWI machines.” I paused then, unsure how interested I really was. I imagined the wires piercing my skin, winding their way up into my veins.

Again, part of me balked at the thought while another part of me bristled with clinical curiosity. “Which programme does Jinx use?” I asked.

“The same one as everyone else,” Sasha said. “It’s the only one we have here: The Lost Fae Realms.”

I gasped as infinite possibilities unwound before me. “I can see the fae realms again? I can go home?”

“Well, you won’t really be home, you know that. But you can see it, walk in it. Do whatever you want, really. Jinx created the programme himself from his own memories.”

“I don’t need credits?”

“You’re Jinx’s sister. No credits are necessary.”

I had completely forgotten my shock at seeing Jinx with the mortal woman. I thought about being able to see the twin waterfalls once more, the vast floating city, and even my disgust at having wires inserted into my skin left me.

“Jack me in, Sasha,” I whispered.

He smiled and bowed.

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The wires were not as unpleasant as I had imagined. A slight pinch as each of the ten tentacles went in, a bizarre drawing sensation as they fought to find purchase in a vein, seeking them out with a terrifying sentience, each one like a sharp little mouth. Once they were inserted, Sasha told me to lie back and relax. I thought for a moment that the machine wasn’t working, but suddenly there was a blinding flash of white before my eyes—

And I was there.

The ground felt solid beneath my feet. A breeze blew against my face and I could hear birdsong above me. I didn’t want to move in case I broke the spell. In the distance were the floating platforms of the great city, cast upon a violet ocean that stretched out into infinity. The city shimmered beneath the giant orb of our moon, suspended in a velvet sky so full of stars the night shone silver. I clapped my hands in delight and spun around, breathing in the heady aromas of home: lavender and willow bark and the strong, saccharine scent of jasmine. For the briefest of moments, my

sheer ecstasy at being able to gaze upon the fae realms once more made me forget that it was all an illusion.

A strange voice rang out, jarring against the stillness of the cool evening and making me pause. I looked around for the source of the unwanted distraction and made out a human male, standing beside the river that fed into the ocean beyond. He was urinating against the trunk of a yew tree, one hand pressed against the bark. I bristled with anger.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, striding towards him.

The man didn’t bother to turn and look at me. “Calm down, love,” he said. “I’m just taking a piss. You never seen a grown man’s cock before?” He laughed loudly.

I felt a sense of raw horror threaten to overwhelm me. There was a mortal in my home, infecting the land with his vile filth and petty obscenities. I wished that I was in the ocean city, surrounded by the multi-faceted facades that would blind human eyes.

I thought about the floating city and suddenly I was there, as easily as passing through a door. Great glowing arches swam in the sky, straddling the miles of interconnecting platforms before me.

“Beautiful, ain’t it?” said a voice behind me. I whirled around and grimaced hatefully when I saw that it belonged to yet another mortal; a young woman with long brunette hair and glasses.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I said. “You shouldn’t be able to stand looking at it.”

The woman’s brow creased in confusion and I turned away from her to walk further into the city, anger threatening to stoke the blue flame inside me and provoke me into tearing the whole place down. Mortals were everywhere. They lounged on the benches and sat on the edges of the platforms, dangling their legs into the lavender-hued waters on either side. Everywhere was polluted. Everything was tainted.

I turned into a side street paved with tiny multi-coloured glass beads. The city seemed devoid of spirit or life, the buildings on either side of me were blank and empty. It was as if Jinx’s memories had failed him at this point, as though he had forgotten the more intricate details.

Then it dawned on me. The reason much of the city felt so alien and hollow was because there were no simulated fae populating it. Jinx had created this place as a blank page for humanity. An empty playground devoid of my kin’s vibrancy and power. I felt sick.

The street led to a courtyard that housed a glittering fountain where musicians and storytellers had once gathered, all eager to display their various talents. I bent to trail my fingers in the purple waters of the fountain, drawn up from the sea, and even in the midst of my despair I couldn't help but marvel at how real the water felt against my skin. I walked around the immense structure, pausing when something splashed against me and the sound of laughter splintered the brief peace. I rounded the fountain's vast corner and stopped, completely aghast at the sight before me.

Two humans were making love in the water, rutting against each other with all the tender beauty of warthogs rolling over in mud. I screamed then, long and high and piercing, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. The two mortals sprung apart and stared at me open-mouthed.

"How dare you!" I screeched, knowing I sounded quite mad but unable to control myself. "How dare you violate this place. You, who destroy everything and understand nothing."

I began to spasm with grief. My shoulders heaved and my chest burned with sobs. I cried until my vision blurred and the city spun away from me. I struggled to wake up, to return to the real world. When I finally opened my eyes, Jinx's concerned face was hovering above my own.

"Briana," he was saying. "Come back to me, Briana."

Sasha was beside me, hurriedly pulling the wretched wires from my arms. As soon as I was free from the groping tentacles of the TWI machine I leapt up from the seat and turned to face Jinx, tears still coursing down my cheeks.

"How could you create that awful place?" I asked him. "How could you taint our memories by filling it with filthy mortals? Our home was sacred and you have destroyed it."

Jinx tried to reach for me but I sprang away. "It's not our home, Briana," he said. "It's not real. Our home is lost to us."

"You love these mortals so much you let them see into our very souls," I hissed. "These things were never meant for their eyes. They do hideous things there, vile carnal acts that make the sacrifices of our kin meaningless."

"They make me strong, Briana," Jinx suddenly shouted, pulling himself up to his full height and glowering at me. "Their cravings might seem tawdry and common to us, but there is a subtle power hidden in their simple desires. You could draw from it too. You could be strong as you once were, like me."

“No,” I shouted back. “I will not lower myself to be like you. To discard everything I have ever loved.”

I ran out then, out into the leering, filthy faces, the grasping hands, the cries of desperation that clung to me like sentient, crawling things and refused to let go. Finally, I fell to my knees amid the stinking dirt and howled up at the veiled stars like a stricken infant. I begged to be taken back to the true fae realms, away from this cloying, diseased reality.

But those realms were no more. They only lived on in my heart and my memory. There, and in Jinx’s vivid landscapes where they were pawed over and dissected by weak, pain-ridden human minds. My choices were scant and dreadful. I could wander this world alone, sick with grief and wracked with sorrow until the earth consented to crush me to her breast once more. Or—

I stood and looked back towards the camps, towards the tented palace that housed Jinx and his brain-shredding technological wonders.

I began to walk.

## **About the Author**

Caroline Barnard-Smith has been writing stories since she was five years old. Having graduated from the University of Portsmouth with a bachelor's degree in English Literature, she now lives in Devon, England with her husband and baby daughter where she writes about ruthless vampires, lovelorn zombies and heinous blood cults.

Her short stories have been published in numerous small press magazines including Ballista, Hungur and Night to Dawn, and on the web at Dark Fire Fiction. Caroline's debut dark fantasy novel, Dunraven Road, was published by Immanion Press in June 2009.

Find out more about Caroline's fiction at her website:

[www.carolinebarnardsmith.co.uk](http://www.carolinebarnardsmith.co.uk)

## **Also Available**

### **The Undead Alliance by Caroline Barnard-Smith ISBN 978-1456593469**

A new novella from the author of *Dunraven Road*.

He's a stinking, undead, rotting carcass with unfortunate brain activity. She's a human captive, kept alive so that her vital organs can one day help sustain her rotting zombie masters. *Romeo and Juliet* they ain't.

Gabriel thought that waking up as a zombie was the end of the world. In fact, a new world was just beginning - a world of dark, creeping horror overseen by a decomposing eccentric in a pirate costume calling himself Captain James.

Five short years later and the dead have risen up to claim the UK. Gabriel finds himself in charge of the North Sector Harvesting Plant, watching the daily influx of the living with a weary eye. Having become increasingly disillusioned with the Undead Alliance and its practices, the arrival of the very human Daisy seems to be his salvation - but who would ever love a zombie? If he wants to convince her he's more than just the sum of his maggot infested parts, he'll have to break her out of the harvesting plant and defy everything the Alliance stands for. All of which is easier said than done, especially when he has to deal with the unwanted attentions of Princess - the icy paramour of Captain James himself.

Is Gabriel strong enough to turn against his charismatic yet ultimately evil leader? Or will he watch Daisy die?

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**Jinn Nation by Caroline Barnard-Smith**  
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Once, the vampire Dylan had feared nothing and no one. He'd rampaged throughout the world on a seemingly never ending quest to fill his eternal years with the finest, most outrageous extravagances; with exquisite, soft-limbed young women and copious amounts of rich, vibrating blood. But life, however full of joy, inevitably changes.

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**Keep reading for a preview of Jinn Nation, Caroline's latest dark novel...**

# Jinn Nation

## One

The girl looked tired. She walked to the bar and perched on a stool, barely glancing up when Larry approached. He had been tending the same bar for a decade, he'd seen all types pass through its doors. He knew the girl didn't belong here, she would probably be dead by closing time. Still, he wasn't paid to indulge his conscience.

"What are you having?"

For a moment, he thought the girl hadn't heard him.

"Hey, Lady," he tried again. "What do you want?"

A group of men leaning against the bar had already seen the newcomer. They nudged each other as they stared at her, a sudden air of anticipation spreading their mouths wide with leering grins.

"What beer you got?" the girl asked.

Larry waved his arm at the trio of pumps in front of him. "What you see is what you get."

The girl indicated the nearest pump and Larry set a glass beneath it. It's a shame, he thought as he poured the beer, she's pretty too.

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Dylan drained the last from his cigarette and tossed it to the floor. He exhaled, his face turned to the burgeoning moon. He loved nights like this. Nights when the moon was full and the sky strung with stars. They sang out across the miles of desert, cold and still and full of portent.

He turned back to the bar, skirting the line of shining motorbikes racked up outside. Inside, the light was dull and heavy with smoke. The patrons preferred to deal their business in shadow.

Dylan made his way to the bar and sat beside a pretty brunette, glancing at her before ordering a beer. He briefly wondered what she was doing here, out in the middle of nowhere. She didn't look lost. She stared down at her glass with her

shoulders hunched, as if daring someone to approach her. It wasn't long before someone did.

“Let me buy that beer for you.”

The girl looked up at the stranger, surrounded on both sides by his jackal-eyed friends. She appeared emotionless, devoid even of simple human interest. “I've already paid.”

“Then let me buy you another.”

The girl ignored him. She turned back to her drink, took a long swig. The smile vanished from the man's face. He demanded respect in this bar. Everyone in it knew who he was: Ernie, leader of the Coldbloods. Feared, reviled, but never ignored. He reached out and grasped the girls' arm as his pack crowded closer, blocking the exit.

“You're rude, Girl. I thought we could have a little fun before I split you open. But fair's fair, let's forget that and get straight down to business.” He laughed and his friends followed suit, sniggering amongst themselves.

Behind the bar, Larry pretended not to notice. He had seen this played out many times before, with many different girls. It always ended the same way. He just hoped they took it outside this time, he hated cleaning up after them. They liked to play with their food.

The girl didn't flinch. She continued to stare, her eyes cold and steely.

“You like that idea?” Ernie said, his mouth contorted in an ugly sneer. “Why else would you come all the way out here? Do you want to die, Girl?”

Quick as a darting fish, the girl made a grab for Ernie's hand, pinning it to the arm he held even as he tried to pull away.

“My name's not Girl,” she said. Her voice was calm, measured, jarring with a British accent.

From his vantage point, Dylan couldn't see the girl's face. She was turned towards Ernie, her body twisted on the stool. He wondered what it was they could see in her eyes, Ernie and his cronies. Their faces fell, flushed with fear and confusion. Their laughter died away and they began to back towards the door. The girl remained still, her hand unmoving, unwilling to release Ernie. Eventually, he managed to pull free. He staggered towards his friends, his hand clasped to his chest, hardly daring to lift his eyes to the other patrons. The girl waited until the roar of departing motorbikes sounded from outside before turning back to her beer. The hush that had descended on

the bar dissipated. The sounds of talking and glasses banging down on tables returned. Normality resumed. As normal as The Starlight Lodge would ever be, anyway.

Dylan relaxed and drank his own beer. He didn't want to know what had happened, he could do without that sort of hassle. Still, he kept sneaking looks at the girl over the top of his glass. He had never seen anyone scare the Coldbloods that way. He had believed she was human, but that didn't seem to be the case.

The girl's eyes suddenly snapped to him, obscured by drifts of unkempt hair. "Did you want something?"

"What?"

"You're staring. It's rude to stare."

Dylan reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigarettes. "Well, I didn't mean to. I was curious about what you did, actually." He laughed. "I've never seen Ernie Coldblood look like that."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "Is that his real name?"

"He's the leader of the Coldbloods."

The girl looked blank.

"A jinn pack," Dylan continued. "You do know what kind of place this is, right?"

"Well, I didn't think it was a karaoke bar."

Dylan smiled. "Any day but Wednesday, and you would be right."

"You're kidding?" The girl glanced behind her, at the solidly built men wearing their tattoos and facial scars with pride, at the women with shaved heads and nose rings, as if trying to imagine them with a microphone, belting out 'I Will Survive'.

"It was all Larry's idea, wasn't it Larry?" The bartender grunted. "Brings people in on a slow night."

"Do you sing?" the girl asked.

Dylan shook his head, horrified. "Absolutely not. I'd clear the place out with my voice. It's reserved for the shower only." He regarded the girl for a moment before extending his hand across the bar. "I'm Dylan."

The girl almost turned away, almost ignored his gesture to resume drinking her beer in silence, but something made her pause. She put her hand in his and shook it, quickly and neatly. "I'm Christa."

Dylan picked up his cigarettes and shook one loose, relieved he didn't seem to have pissed the girl off the way Ernie had. "You smoke?"

"Sure."

He lit Christa's cigarette before extracting one for himself. "So you're from England?"

The girl nodded, but didn't offer further explanation. She blew out a long column of smoke and drained her glass, watching as Larry retrieved it wordlessly and set it back beneath the pump.

"I was in England a while ago," Dylan said. "Nice place. The food didn't agree with me." He laughed to himself.

Christa didn't look up, but she smiled. "Magic in the blood. Made your head vibrate."

Dylan stopped laughing. He looked around the bar, glanced at Larry. The bartender was busy serving a hunched-looking man, standing several paces away from them. "That's a strange thing to say," he said.

"It is, isn't it?" This time Christa looked at him, startling green-grey eyes clear and shining in the half-light, not quite seeing through, but into him.

Dylan felt something pull deep inside, as if nimble fingers were prying apart the corners of his psyche, probing to see what lay at the very centre of him. He sat back, unnerved.

"Jinn don't eat blood," Christa was saying. "They tear at more substantial things. Livers and kidneys. Not the stomachs though, that makes them sick."

"You know a lot about them," Dylan said. He finished his beer and signalled to Larry, pointed at the bottle of cheap bourbon behind the bar. Larry filled a glass and waited while Dylan fumbled money out of his pocket and paid him.

"I used to watch them," Christa said. "I like to learn."

"Yes, learning's good." The bourbon was warm, filled with rich fire. Dylan drank deeply and felt his limbs begin to loosen, heavy with alcohol. He looked at the girl again. She was small against the dank of the bar, her clothes cheap and ill-fitting. Her hands trembled almost imperceptibly against the glass she cradled. Dylan leaned towards her. "Why are you here?"

Christa looked confused by the question. She thought for a moment before replying, "Why are you?"

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Dylan wasn't surprised by the cheapness of the girl's motel room. It seemed to fit with the odd clothes and untamed hair. This was not a girl who lived for the finer things in life. Or could afford them, at any rate.

He stared around the cramped space, searching for any clues as to Christa's identity. His curiosity remained unsatisfied. There wasn't so much as a hairbrush on the nightstand.

Christa remained standing just inside the door, head cocked, appraising Dylan's shadowy form in the dark.

"I hate these places," Dylan said. "So impersonal and joyless." He walked to the television facing the bed and jabbed at the buttons below the screen. "Did you know your TV's not working?"

"I don't watch TV," Christa said, head still cocked, eyes glittering. "People on TV are stupid, it annoys me."

"I think it's a stipulation of the entertainment business, stupidity. If your IQ's too high, you'll never make it." Dylan began to laugh but stopped when he saw the strange way Christa was looking at him. He briefly wondered if it was too late to edge past her and escape.

"I've decided that I like you," Christa said. The statement was bald, simple. It caught Dylan off-guard. He stared at her for several moments.

"Does that mean I win something?" he finally said.

Christa began moving towards him. She had the look of a cat stalking prey, her hips swung from side to side and her face darkened with intent. Dylan waited for her to reach him, to lift her hands to his face. He braced himself for impact, for inevitable pain, and was pleasantly surprised when she only shoved him hard in the chest, pushing him down onto the bed. He began to speak but one hard-edged look silenced him. Christa was obviously not a woman who liked to be interrupted. Instead, Dylan let her undress him. He relaxed beneath her, let her hands wander where they wanted. She lifted her shirt over her head, legs wrapped around him, pinning him down. Dylan smiled. She was much better looking than her baggy clothes suggested. He closed his eyes, content to bow to her will. It had been a while since anyone had wanted him this way.

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When Christa woke and found Dylan still sprawled beside her, one arm thrown across her body, she was surprised. She turned her face to the bright desert light filtering through the grimy glass of the window. Her head ached dully and her eyes strained. Her mouth still tasted of beer. She wondered how long she should lie there before attempting to move and waking Dylan. She wasn't used to finding men in her bed in the morning. Usually she would collapse, utterly exhausted, and never notice them gathering up their clothes and making a hasty getaway. She never cared that they didn't want to stay. This though, was different.

She turned back to look at Dylan. He was sleeping peacefully, blue-black hair fallen across his forehead. Her gaze travelled down, rested on the thick scar marring the skin across his stomach. Brand of the jinn. Tentatively, she moved her hand and rested her palm against his taught abdomen, against the scar's jagged, raised surface. There was something about Dylan that jarred, grated against the jinn stones sewn inside the soft meat of his belly. He had a power that shone icy blue against his skin, cold and ancient as glaciers. A power that didn't sit comfortably within his new jinn-self. She sensed conflict and pain. Christa retracted her hand and Dylan stirred, opened his eyes.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," Christa replied. "What are you still doing here?"

Dylan sat up and stretched, pushing himself back against the headboard. "That's nice," he said. "You asked me to stay, remember?"

"Well, yes but—" Christa stopped herself. "I didn't think you actually would. I was just being polite."

"You want me to go?"

Dylan began to rise from the bed, but Christa laid a hand on his arm to stop him. "No, it's okay," she said. She gestured towards the window. "The sun's out, anyway." She paused. "Would you catch on fire or something? If you went outside?"

Dylan threw back the thin duvet and jumped up from the bed. He glared at Christa, trying to look imposing despite his nakedness. "Okay, what's going on here?" he demanded. "How the hell do you know who I am?"

Christa laughed, hiding her face behind her hands. "Nothing's going on. You are a vampire, aren't you?"

Dylan faltered, but only for a moment. “Everyone knows that vampires don’t exist. They died out decades ago. Plus, they could walk in the sun. Sunlight, stakes and garlic, they were all myths.”

“But you’re a vampire,” Christa insisted, sure that she was right. “A vampire with jinn stones in his stomach.”

Dylan scowled, looked away, finally relented. “So what if I am?”

“So what, nothing.” Christa laughed again. It was a pretty laugh, small and childish. “I’m only telling you what I see. Why would you lie about it?”

“It just brings more trouble than it’s worth,” Dylan said. “If people found out what I was, they wouldn’t leave me alone. They would all want full membership to the undead club. I can do without that. Better for them to think vampires are an urban legend. That way, I get to live my afterlife in peace.”

“And the jinn stones?”

Dylan began to answer and stopped, his scowl returning. “I really don’t know you well enough to start explaining all that,” he said.

Christa didn’t answer.

“Are you some kind of witch?”

“No.” She expelled the word more violently than she had meant to. “I just see things, that’s all.”

“Okay.” Dylan held his hands up and backed away. “Why do I always attract the crazy ones?”

Christa pulled the duvet further up her chest, her face suddenly white and drained. “I’m not crazy,” she whispered.

Dylan sighed as he sat back down on the bed. “I’m sure you’re not crazy.” He reached for her hand and held it on top of the duvet. “You just surprised me, that’s all. I haven’t told anyone what I am, it was my secret.”

Christa looked away. She could have made him leave, could have disembowelled him and left him to bleed out on the faded carpet if she really wanted to. But she was tired of being alone. At least this one didn’t want to eat her insides straight away, and he had pretty eyes. Deep blue, like a night time ocean. Finally, she looked up and smiled. “I could keep your secrets.”

## Two

The pains came at night, electrifying and all-consuming. Dylan soon began to scream, doubled over on the bed, the duvet pressed against his mouth and his hands at his stomach. Christa paced the room as she watched him, her arms wrapped around herself. Eventually, she climbed onto the bed and crawled to his side. He lay on his back, eyes closed, skin slick with sweat.

“What’s happening?” she asked. “Are you dying?”

Dylan turned pained eyes to her, contempt simmering in their depths. “I can’t die, I’m a sodding vampire.” He groaned again, back arching from the bed.

“Unfortunately.”

Christa was unperturbed. She studied his shaking body with a detached, clinical curiosity. “Maybe you need to eat?”

Almost reverently, she rose to her knees and extended one white wrist towards him. “You can drink from me.”

The thought of hot blood in his mouth twisted Dylan’s insides with hunger, even through his pain. He lifted his head slightly, eyes fixed on the pale blue veins calling to him through Christa’s skin. When he relented and collapsed back to the bed, head turned firmly away from her, Christa retracted her arm and cradled it against her chest.

“You don’t want me.”

“That’s definitely not the problem,” Dylan said. “If I drink from you now, while I’m like this, I’ll drain you until there’s nothing left. You don’t want to die, do you?”

Christa appeared to contemplate this for a moment before standing up to retrieve the battered leather jacket she had slung over a chair. “I’ll bring you someone else. Yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

Dylan barely registered that she had left the room. The pain continued, hot and rippling, rising through his body again and again like acidic lava.

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The Starlight Lodge was even more crowded than before. Making her way to the bar felt like a battle. Christa wove between the warm jinn bodies, carefully skirting the

hands holding cigarettes and full glasses of beer. When she finally reached Larry behind the bar, he gaped at her.

“You’re back.”

Christa stared back at him, sure he must be stupid. “Yes, well, the beer wasn’t that bad.”

“But you left with Dylan.”

“So?”

Larry shook his head and reached for a glass. Long years of experience had taught him when to ask questions, and when to shut the hell up. “You having beer?”

“No, I think tonight is a bourbon kind of a night.”

Larry nodded and turned to select a bottle. Christa had no idea what bourbon even tasted like. Her curiosity had been peaked though, watching Dylan become glassy-eyed after drinking three large glasses of it the previous night. Larry set a decidedly smaller glass of dark brown liquid down on the bar and Christa sipped it tentatively, trying not to react when the alcohol hit the back of her throat. It tasted like liquid ashes swirled through honey. She smiled at Larry, attempting to seem appreciative. The bartender began to turn to his next customer but Christa spoke again, making him pause.

“You should have finished your studies.”

“What?”

“She would have waited for you. You didn’t need to hide out here, all alone in the cold desert. You should call her, she’d still be happy to hear from you.”

Larry’s eyes widened and his face drained of all colour. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Christa registered his discomfort and lowered her eyes to the glass in her hands. “Nothing, Larry. Don’t mind me.”

She turned away from him, taking tiny sips of the cheap bourbon as she surveyed the crowd. It was too noisy, too compacted with bodies. Christa relaxed her mind and stilled her constant inner commentary, pushing her will outwards to probe at the hum of thoughts and desires floating all around her. A large woman pressed into black leather was talking to a heavily-tattooed young girl in a private booth. The older woman was hoping the girl would go home with her that night. The young girl was waiting for a chance to flirt with the woman’s male friend. Christa smiled and moved on. A girl dressed in lace and feathers was silently screaming at the crowd in front of

the juke box, berating them for their choice of music. A dark jinn mind beside Christa was staring at a man in a floor length velvet coat, fantasising about soft young flesh slipping down his throat.

Christa shifted against the bar, drank more bourbon. A sense of urgency was beginning to peak within her, making her nervous. She could feel Dylan's pain building, stretching out across the flat expanse between them, as bright and vital as a stuttering neon road sign.

Finally, Christa felt herself being drawn to a likely candidate. A frail human girl was sat in a booth across the room, perched amongst a small crowd of jinn. Their intent was vivid and eager. They were already imagining the moment they would take the girl, when they would lay her down and tear at her flesh until they were sated. The pretty blonde girl was drunk and completely oblivious to her new friends' true nature. The alcohol drenching her senses made it easy for Christa to slip a suggestion into her mind.

The girl stood suddenly, swaying before the table. "I need the bathroom."

A stout, bearded man on her left eyed her greedily. "Hurry back, Darlin'."

The girl giggled and manoeuvred her way out of the booth, pausing in the middle of the room. She looked from the restroom in the corner to the bar's entrance behind her, confusion settling over her fragile features. Christa gave her a final nudge. The girl finally turned towards the front doors and staggered out into the clear desert night while Christa drained her glass and followed.

The girl stopped again when the cold night air hit her, glancing back uncertainly at the bar. She saw Christa standing behind her and smiled.

"I don't think I'm supposed to be here."

"No, you're in the right place," Christa said.

"But my friends are inside. We're going to a party later."

"You wouldn't like their kind of parties," Christa said. "They want to kill you, you know. Kill you and eat you."

The girl laughed. "No way!" The drop in temperature had done nothing to dull her buzz.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Christa said. "Come with me, I'll take you to a real party."

The girl knew she should be wary of anything offered by a stranger, but something told her she could trust Christa. Silently, she took her hand and began walking beside her, back towards the motel.

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By the time Christa returned, Dylan was lapsing in and out of consciousness. He stared up at the ceiling, eyes glazed and unseeing, hands clenching uselessly at the duvet strewn beneath him. Christa led the girl into the room and leant over the bed to smooth damp hair from his forehead.

“I’ve brought you a present,” she whispered. “Sit up, Dylan.”

Dylan remained motionless, his breath falling in staggered gasps. Christa ushered the girl forward.

“Give me your arm,” she commanded.

The girl ignored her. “What’s wrong with him?” she asked instead. “Has he overdosed or something? Look, I’m not into drugs. I don’t know what sort of party this is, but I—”

Christa silently hushed the girl who complied immediately, her mouth parting slightly.

“Now, give me your arm.”

This time the girl obeyed, slow and lethargic as a mindless zombie. Christa pulled the girl towards the bed and held her wrist over Dylan’s face.

“Wake up, Dylan,” she tried again. “This will make you feel better.”

Dylan still didn’t respond. Infuriated, Christa glanced around the room, looking for something sharp. Her eyes settled on a glass standing on the nightstand. Keeping a firm grip on the girl’s arm, Christa reached for it and slammed it hard against the floor, flinching when thin shards of glass penetrated the soft meat of her palm. She had to drop the girl’s arm to pull the shards free, but soon grabbed for it again, one long sliver of liberated glass glinting in her hand.

“This will be over quick,” she promised her. The girl nodded dumbly.

Christa drew a jagged line across the girl’s wrist with the glass, working quickly lest she lose her nerve. Blood welled up instantly, creating a ragged row of ruby droplets. When Christa offered the girl’s wrist to Dylan again, his eyes finally focused on it, the sweet tang of blood widening his nostrils and deepening his shallow breathing. Painfully, he lifted his heavy arms and reached for the flesh suspended above him, bringing it down to his mouth.

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The strange girl didn't make a sound when Dylan's lengthened teeth bit down into her tender, young tissue. His tongue automatically probed for a vein, hands clamped so firmly around the girl's arm that tiny bones broke apart inside. Finally, he was able to pull away and sit up. He stared at the girl in confusion. She only looked on blankly, bloody arm fallen limp to her side.

"Christa, who is this?"

"I brought her here for you, to make you feel better."

Dylan looked from the girl to Christa, not quite sure if he had begun to hallucinate. Christa was sat cross-legged on the nightstand like some malevolent pixie, an excited gleam in her eyes. He shuffled backwards, away from her. His head felt swollen and oddly bruised. Pain still trembled in the depths of his ruined stomach, but he was aware of his surroundings for the first time in hours. He studied the fragrant young girl Christa had brought him. She couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. Her eyes were milky and unfocused, her skin damp, prickled by goose flesh.

"Is she okay?" he said.

Christa nodded. She was grinning stupidly. "I had to make her quiet, or she wouldn't have wanted to stay."

Dylan ached to ask Christa how she had done it. Yearned to know what, exactly, she was. But the currents of pain were massing again, ready to leap up and tear through him once more. He turned back to the girl.

"Come here, Beautiful."

The girl didn't acknowledge him.

"Get up on the bed," Christa ordered.

The girl bent and crawled across the bed to Dylan on hands and knees. He reached for her eagerly, pulling her up to his chest. Grabbing a handful of her thick golden hair, he pushed her face down against the mattress and lunged at the nape of her neck, teeth bared, eyes wild.

With Christa's wide-eyed gaze hot upon him, Dylan suckled at the wound he had made, making appreciative noises deep in the back of his throat. He drank until his eyes rolled back in his head and the girl's skin became as pale and translucent as tracing paper. When he was finally satisfied, he turned the girl over in his arms. Her

face was sunken and warped. Two dark hollows gleamed where her cheeks had been. Dylan looked up to see that Christa was still smiling cheerfully.

“Now I need a cigarette,” he said.

“What should we do with her?” Christa said, jumping down from the nightstand. She sat on the edge of the bed and peered at the girl, seemingly fascinated by the greasy quality of her once flawless skin. She reached out one tentative hand, but couldn’t quite bring herself to touch the body.

“We’ll leave her here,” Dylan said. “I’m done with her.”

“What about when the maid comes in the morning? She’ll find her.”

“So what?” Dylan pushed the body away and covered the face with a greying pillow. “I’ll be long gone by then. That’s something I love about this country, the place is so damn big you can disappear anywhere.”

“Oh, of course.” Christa looked down and played with the edge of the duvet. It was a sickening peach colour that reminded Dylan of melted ice cream.

“You want to come with me?” he asked. “I’ve spent too long in the desert, it’s time to see civilisation again.”

Christa smiled shyly and nodded, still not meeting his eyes. “Yes, I’d like that.”

Dylan laid back, hands behind his head. Christa might be strange, he thought to himself, but she had certainly proved herself useful to have around. If he travelled with her long enough, he might even unearth her obvious secrets. Ever since meeting her he had been filled with the strangest desire to tease those secrets from her and dissect every one.

## Three

Dylan and Christa set out before first light, eating up the long, straight miles in a pick-up truck liberated from a dealership. Dylan insisted on heading north, following the highway out of Arizona and across the state line into Utah.

The sunlight was blindingly strong, piercing the windshield like a lance. Christa spent most of the morning leaning against the car door, her hair blowing in the warm wind from the open window. She only became animated when Monument Valley loomed into view. It shimmered like a mirage on the horizon at first, growing in stature and depth the closer they got. They finally passed beneath it and Christa craned her neck to see the rising columns of staggered rock from every angle, alien and stark against the ancient landscape.

“Look at that,” she exclaimed. “It’s beautiful.”

Dylan squinted at the view through his expensive sunglasses and shrugged. “They’re just rocks.”

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By nightfall, Dylan’s pains had begun to creep back. The setting sun fell behind the ridges and peaks on either side of the road, painting them in softly glowing pinks and ambers, but he paid no attention to the scenery. Instead, he sat hunched over the wheel, trying to keep his breathing even. When Dylan saw a signpost announcing that Devil’s Ridge Campground was half a mile away, he took the next turning at such speed that Christa had to hold onto the car door to keep from sliding across the leather seat towards him.

“I need to eat,” he explained when she turned to glare at him.

The road soon narrowed to a line of crushed, compacted earth, scarred with the deep grooves made by RVs. The campground was virtually empty. Only a handful of shining vans were clustered together at one corner, their wheels dusted with dirt. Dylan parked at the opposite end.

“You mind staying here tonight?” he asked.

Christa stared around the flat expanse before nodding. A cheap wooden fence separated the campers from an arching precipice beyond. “Yeah, it looks okay.”

They exited the truck and crept towards the small band of quiet vehicles, low and stealthy. Dylan spied into the windows of three different RVs before making his selection and slipping inside the unlocked door. Christa waited uncertainly, arms held around herself for warmth. Several dull thuds sounded and petered away into the heavy silence all around. She glanced at the other vehicles, pausing to make sure no one else had heard, and quickly made her way inside.

Dylan had worked fast. He was crouched on the floor, head bowed over the fleshy neck of a middle-aged woman in long khaki shorts. Her head twitched sporadically as he drank, bristling her mane of teased, peroxide hair. At Christa's feet, a balding man with a sizable paunch lay unconscious. She could still feel his panicked, confused thoughts all around her, tainting the air like a stale odour.

"Help me, please God, help me. He has Evelyn, he's hurting her."

Christa carefully stepped over the man and settled herself on the thin pull-down bed at the back of the van.

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That night they stayed in the RV and made love in the former occupants' bed, surrounded by the sickly body-scents of strangers. For hours they lay beneath a scratchy, hard-wool blanket, arms around each other, smoking cigarettes and telling stories.

"Why do you live the way you do?" Dylan asked.

"What do you mean?" Christa laughed, but her tone was dry and flat.

"Well, you obviously have some power. You were able to convince that girl to come back to the motel. So why stay in shitty motels at all? Why not dazzle the manager of a nice place and live in luxury? Or fuck hotels, you could do it to an estate agent and own your own apartment. Or a mansion with a swimming pool and a gardener."

Dylan laughed into the dark but Christa remained silent against his chest. When she didn't speak he wrapped his arm more tightly around her and stroked her hair.

"You don't like swimming?"

Christa pulled away and sat up, reaching for the cigarettes discarded on the floor. She slowly lit and inhaled before turning back to look at Dylan.

"No, it's not that. It just feels like showing off. I don't like using it all the time."

“What?” Dylan almost choked on the word. He pushed himself back against the meagre pillows and reached for his own cigarette. Christa looked away again. He watched her for a time as she gently expelled soft blue smoke, following its progress as it made a wreath around the lights in the ceiling. Finally, he flicked ash into a small plastic plant pot on the narrow window sill and tried a different approach. “What does it feel like when you dazzle people? Is it even a feeling?”

Christa sighed. “Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Fine, I’ll stop.” Then, after a brief pause, “You could still live better than you do.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.” Christa was obviously trying to sound bland and indifferent, but Dylan detected a touch of sadness in her statement.

“You don’t have to know, I’ll show you.” He finished his cigarette and discarded it in the makeshift ashtray before stretching and lifting himself from the bed. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I really must eat this guy.”

Dylan could feel Christa watching him as he approached the balding man, still laid out flat before the door. He was now semi-conscious, eyes roving and desperate. Dylan bent the man’s head, snapping his neck as deftly as a skilled butcher culling a chicken, and set his teeth at his bilious throat. He drank quickly and deeply, grinning at Christa with teeth rinsed in blood when he was done.

“I think I could help you with this,” Christa said.

“With my debilitating blood addiction? Afraid not, Sweetness, that one’s with me for life.” Dylan rolled the man over and away from him before standing to wash his hands in the RV’s tiny sink.

Christa eyed the scar dividing his stomach. “They don’t sit right with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“The jinn stones. They keep trying to latch onto the essence of a man, but only find a cold vampire. That’s why you get the pains. They’re waging a battle inside you: the vampire against the jinn.”

“Who do you think is winning? I’ve got my money on the vampire, he’s been in more fist fights.”

“Dylan, I’m being serious,” Christa persisted. “I think I could force your two selves to combine, to work together.”

Dylan only smiled and returned to the bed, pulling Christa towards him. “You’re welcome to try.”

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Having discarded the campers' bodies in the back of their pick-up truck, Dylan and Christa left Devil's Ridge Campground in the morning, roaring away in the clunky RV. With every mile Dylan put between the RV and the campground his hunched shoulders became a little looser, his smile a little easier. He had never been one to revel for too long at the scene of a crime. His elders had taught him better than that.

It was almost midday when Christa suddenly woke, as if from a heat-induced trance, and lightly touched Dylan's arm.

"Stop here. Just over there, this is the perfect place."

"Perfect for what?" Dylan felt irritable and restless. He wished the air was cooler and the sun was lower in the sky.

"I'm going to try and help you, remember?"

Dylan sighed. "Look Christa, I'm not really sure about this. I've tried it all before. I haven't just been suffering in silence like some idiot. There was a witch in England and a Satanic priest in Texas. Neither of them could do anything for me."

"They can't do the things that I can do."

The simple confidence in Christa's voice startled Dylan. He glanced at her. "Fine, okay. But I'm not doing any dances, or wearing any cat bones."

Christa laughed. "Yuck, cat bones? No, there will be no bones of any description."

"As long as we're clear." Dylan swung the van from the road and trundled out onto the tired ground, littered with the plastic bottles and coke cans thrown from passing cars. After several minutes, once the highway had become a distant black line in the rear-view mirror, Christa laid her hand on Dylan's arm again.

"Stop here."

Dylan pulled up sharply and climbed out of the RV to look around, one arm raised to shield his eyes. There was nothing but dry, red earth and stunted undergrowth as far as he could see in any direction.

"Okay," Christa said behind him. "Come and sit in the middle of the circle."

Dylan turned and did as he was asked, carefully stepping over the line Christa had drawn in the dirt with a pointed stone. He tried hard to keep from smiling, to convince Christa that he was making a concerted effort on her behalf. In reality, any ritual that began with a power circle made Dylan laugh. The Satanic priest had created just such a circle, using the thin blood wrung from a freshly killed chicken. He had chanted and

danced while Dylan stood and watched, his neck straining beneath multiple strands of beads and a dozen matted feathers woven into his hair. The priest's comical efforts were ultimately useless, but he had made a decent meal. Satisfying enough to dull the pains until New Mexico.

"Close your eyes," Christa said.

Dylan closed one eye, saw Christa glaring at him, and grinned. "Both eyes?" he inquired.

Christa sat cross-legged before him, outside of the circle. "You know very well, both eyes. Do you want my help or not?"

Dylan relented and closed his eyes. The noon sun was directly overhead, burning hotter than a furnace. It lit the darkness behind his eyelids with fiery gold.

"Concentrate on your breathing," Christa said. "Inhale. Exhale. Nice and slow."

Christa's voice soon drifted away and Dylan began to float within himself, letting his mind wander where it would. The intense sun grew stronger and brighter, pricking his skin with searing, white heat.

He had almost lost sense of where he was when a sudden, choking surge built behind his ribcage. He began to panic, but forcefully calmed himself and kept his eyes closed. Inhale. Exhale. Rinse and repeat. The surge contorted and changed until it was a ripping sensation that made him feel his chest was breaking apart. His eyes flew open and he stared down at his torso, mouth dropping open when he saw a rippling stream of black jetting from his body, thick and gleaming like a river of gasoline.

He looked up at Christa. Her eyes were still closed. She was serene and radiant, a small smile on her lips. The black force rushing from his aching ribs went through, and beyond her. She seemed to be channelling it away from herself. It fanned out behind her and raced across the flat, mud-red ground, disappearing into the horizon. Around the hastily drawn line of the power circle, a curtain of sandy earth had risen, creating a fine trembling mesh between them. Dylan hardly dared breathe, scared he would interrupt Christa and the dark force raging through him would literally tear him apart. Eventually the sand-curtain fell, covering them both in thin dust. The black stream faltered and stopped, cast away on desert heat. Dylan felt shaky and faint. He closed his eyes and when he looked again, Christa had collapsed on the ground before him. He crawled to her on hands and knees.

"Christa, are you okay?"

She murmured and twitched, struggling to move. Dylan carefully lifted her head into his lap. “What the hell was that?”

“It’s gone now,” Christa managed, her voice hoarse and broken. “The pain’s gone. Told you I could do it.” She tried to smile.

“Shit, yeah. You did something, alright.”

They stayed that way for half an hour, Dylan cradling Christa in his lap while the disturbed earth settled around them and the sun dipped lower. Eventually, Dylan was able to help Christa stand. He manoeuvred her back into the van and they drove away, back towards the long, straight highway.

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