

FEVERSONG

PROLOGUE

MAC

My philosophy is pretty simple—any day I’m not killing somebody is a good day in my book.

I haven’t had many good days lately.

I reflect on the highlights of the past year:

July 5, the day my sister Alina called my cellphone and left a frantic message that I ended up not hearing until weeks later. She was murdered, abandoned in a trash-filled alley shortly after she placed that call.

August 3, the night I arrived in Dublin, saw my first Fae monster behind the glamour and realized either I was crazy or the world was. Turns out the world was but that didn’t help much.

September: an entire month vanished during a single afternoon in Faery, playing volleyball with an illusion of my dead sister.

October 3, I was tortured and nearly killed by the vampire- wannabe Mallucé in his hellish grotto beneath the Burren. That’s the night I learned to eat the flesh of dark Fae for its healing properties and the enormous strength it bestowed.

October 31, Halloween, the night the walls between man and Fae came crashing down, I was gang raped by four Unseelie princes and turned into a mindless shell of a woman, an addict to Fae sex. November, December, and part of January are calendar pages ripped cleanly from my mind, leaving no memory at all, until I surfaced from being hellishly Pri-ya to find I’d spent all that time in bed with Jericho Barrons.

Then there's that date I'll never know—impossible to gauge the day, year, or even century in the Silvers—when I killed Barrons and, believing him dead, became a woman obsessed with obtaining the *Sinsar Dubh* so I could recreate a world with him in it.

More of January and February: lost in the Silvers, working with the enemy, the Lord Master, plotting my revenge.

May 11, the night I learned the girl I loved like a sister was the one who'd killed my sister.

May 16, the day we reentered the *Sinsar Dubh* in the underground chamber at the abbey and I discovered V'lane was really Cruce, one of my four rapists, and that I'd been working all along with the most cunning, dangerous Unseelie prince in existence.

June 26, the day I chased Dani into the Hall of All Days, a place I didn't dare follow. If I had a do-over, I'd leap through that damned Silver and chase her anyway, despite the formidable odds.

July 22, I discovered who Jada was, and that my brilliant, effervescent, spunkalicious Dani was gone, leaving behind a controlled, humorless, stone-cold killer.

Now, I add another date to my grim tally.

One year five days after I first touched my well-pedicured foot to Ireland's wild soil—*August 8*: the day the *Sinsar Dubh* won. And all it had to do to defeat me was wait patiently, quasi-quietly, with gentle nudges here and there, until I mind-fucked myself into crossing that forbidden line. It took my hostile squatter a mere two and a half months from the day I buried the corporeal Book beneath the abbey to seduce me into opening it.

I'd spent most of that time sleuthing for a spell to summon the Unseelie king and demand he reclaim his Book from inside me, withdrawing from Barrons and the world, becoming a shell of who I was—all because I'd been afraid the *Sinsar Dubh* might somehow trick me into opening it.

It had.

I understand something now: that which we fear, we somehow beckon near and engage in a dance, as toxically intimate as a pair of suspicious lovers. Perhaps it's because deep down we want to face it. Perhaps it's just the way the universe works; we're magnetized waltzers and our hopes and fears emit some kind of electrical impulses that attract all that we dream, and all that we dread. We live

and die on a dance floor of our own making.

Here, now, drifting where it's silent and still, I begin to apprehend with acute clarity every single thing I did wrong.

1

“The killer awoke before dawn, he put his boots on”

A warehouse in a Dark Zone, Dublin, Ireland

I rise.

Or try to.

Jada crashes into me with a muffled grunt then her hands are on me, everywhere, touching, patting and pulling, undoing my restraints, and the sensation is too much. My body is hypersensitive.

Finally, she frees my hands. I push her away and open my eyes. Too fast, too much. Light thrusts cruel needles into my brain.

I close my eyes swiftly. Scents assault me: the acrid odor of the Sweeper's minions, concrete and dust, chemicals and sweat.

“Turn off the lights,” I say.

“Why?” Jada says.

“I have a headache.” I wait without moving as she hurries about the warehouse, extinguishing the blinding lights the Sweeper arranged for our surgery.

Once I sense diminished brilliance beyond my lids, I open my eyes again. Tolerable.

“Mac, what did you do?” Jada exclaims. “They're gone. Just gone!”

Sound impacts the delicate structure of my ears as if she's taken a gong to a shield. Not gone. The Sweeper and his minions were displaced, still nearby. I say, "A simple spell of sifting—backward, not forward." No Fae has the power to fold things into the future, and only the king and I possess this small way to manipulate the past. In a matter of minutes the Sweeper will be here again, at our operating tables. But I intend to be gone.

I. Intend.

I rise. My body doesn't move as planned. It shudders, flops, and goes limp. "Stiff from being on the table so long," I tell Jada, who watches me with narrowed eyes. I contract my abdomen, bend at the waist, stabilize my upper body, rotate my hips and shift my legs as a unit over the side of the gurney and touch my feet to the floor.

I stand.

I AM.

Desire. Lust. Greed. And the path I choose to supremacy.

Master of adaptation and evolution, I slide more surely in my skin with each breath, enjoying the complex albeit imperfect elegance of what I possess. I inhale long and slow, swelling first my abdomen then lungs with air. Breathing brings an assault of unfathomable stench, but I will acclimate.

Everything MacKayla Lane experienced is filed in my meticulous mental vault, but during my incarceration in her body I couldn't see, I couldn't hear, I couldn't smell.

I was—as she is now—trapped in a dark silent prison, my only connection to the world an attachment I forged to her central nervous system, through supremacy of will and relentless trial and failure. My existence was a smattering of complex electrical charges, intricate patterns without substance. Although I spied on her life as much as possible, I was able to seize use of her body, hands, and eyes only once, for brief duration. All else was diluted, secondhand perception absorbed from within except on that overcast rainy day I killed the Gray Woman and Mick O'Leary.

The power. The glory. That was the day I knew I would win.

Those clumsy, debilitating hours I rode a body for the first time.

I require time to perfect control.

I. Require.

I draw myself up inside, gathering the enormity, the ancientness, the hunger and storm of my existence, and expand into the imperfect biological vessel I've claimed, saturating, possessing, every atom. I fill my blood, my bones, my skin.

I turn the full force of my regard upon Jada, blink once and reveal myself. My eyes, reflected in the stainless steel door of a commercial freezer unit behind her, fill with obsidian until no white remains. Around me the very air cools; I have such presence.

She changes color. Fear impacts the nerves that connect brain to heart, constricting circulation. The blood vanishes from her face, leaving freckles upon snow. Her eyes widen, her pupils dilate and freeze. The scent of her body alters to one I find . . . intriguing.

I experience all of this with my own senses. It's incomparable. My mere existence embedded within this stolen skin reprograms the anatomy of those around me.

Power.

I was made for it.

I would prefer to shred her flesh from bone but several things prevent me. I smile with my new face.

"I would run if I were you," I tell her softly.

She does, lightning fast. No hesitation, no debilitating deliberation. There one moment, gone the next. Among humans, she is superior.

I covet her speed and dexterity. MacKayla Lane would call it "freeze-framing." If I could eat Jada and absorb her talent, I would ignore those things that stay my hand.

There is something else I can eat. Clever MacKayla. Flawed MacKayla. Those that fall pave the way for my ascendance. When one begins at the bottom, ascendance is a given.

I depart the warehouse and enter the gloomy day.

I enter.

I am. The Sweeper will appear shortly. Not even I have the power to destroy that one.

I'd contemplated pretending to be MacKayla, living among them, infiltrating their circle while pursuing my goals, but deemed the risk of discovery too high. Concealing my brilliance, feigning to be so much less—impossible. Besides, I am a newly forged sword and will surely benefit from time with hammer and fire.

Time, my enemy, my ally. I have precious little of the commodity to implement my plan. Expediency is directly proportionate to success. When opponents war, the strongest and swiftest wins. I am already the former and intend to be the latter.

Until they hunt me, time is my ally. I possess the weapon to accomplish all my goals. I prize the spear, I loathe it. It might damage me. Its weight beneath my arm both reassures and repulses.

Singing softly beneath my breath—one of MacKayla's favorites, "Sh-boom, sh-boom, life could be a dream sweetheart"—I move down an alley, around a corner, proceeding to my first objective. My map of Dublin, once an amalgam of neural currents, now has visual latitude and longitude. While MacKayla wandered aimless, I did not. I was paying attention.

What a sorry experiment she was. I desired so much more.

Unwavering laser-focus on one's goals is power. Humans rarely achieve it, infesting their garden with the cultivated parasites of empathy, compassion, mercy, nurturing the grubs of guilt and penance, heaping emotional fertilizer on every acre of arable, marchable, conquerable land until nothing remains but the sky-high, sickly weeds of their stunted vision. A blind gardener reaps no crop, escapes no predator.

We are desire, lust, greed, and the path we choose to supremacy.

Humans romanticize this truth. Fact: they *desire* sex. Fact: they *desire* limiting that vessel from having sex with others. Fact: they create a ritual called marriage and an illusion called love to validate their *greed* and bid for *supremacy* over the object of their *lust*.

WE ARE DESIRE, LUST, GREED AND THE PATH WE CHOOSE TO SUPREMACY. Take notes. Cretins. Idiots. Call it what it is. Then go forth and fucking conquer.

There are currently two Unseelie princes and one princess living. They will die. I permit none between my throne and me.

My body is human, not prince. Pity. A Fae form would eradicate irksome limitations. But there were no princes available the night I seized the opportunity for escape. I lack wings to soar into the sky, slash Death's throat with my spear

and douse the fire below with his blood.

But my first victim knows MacKayla and will come to her unaware she is me.

I giggle. “Surprise,” I murmur, envisioning the moment.

I spy the first of my children, offspring of the spells I am as I exit the Dark Zone. They are more my seed than they ever were the penitent king’s. Oxymoron that. A true king knows no penitence, bows to nothing and no one.

All of MacKayla’s knowledge of the world around her is mine. Her names for things come easily to me. My existence within her has been far more vivid than anything I experienced from within the covers of the Book that once incarcerated me. Three of my forty-ninth-made caste—those she calls Rhino-boys—have a woman in the alley, willing sacrifice to partake of their flesh. They play with her for momentary pleasure, beady eyes, beady minds, puny shadows flickering in puny caves.

Much of the Unseelie king’s knowledge is mine as well. I sprang into existence from the spells he created to birth his Dark Court and know the true names of the Unseelie, which grants me control over them. Unfortunately there are those Unseelie recently born, such as the Highlander prince, whose names are yet unknown or I would simply summon him and slay him now. Then there is Cruce, currently bound by the king’s chamber magic, impossible to summon. I will eliminate my most challenging enemies first.

I chime in the First Language and three tusked heads swivel. I command them to worship me, to offer the flesh that will grant me Jada’s strength and speed. The woman is abandoned as my children stumble, snuffle, and fall to their knees, heads bowed, shaking with fear and subservience. A simple caste. Not my finest work.

The Fae have long hungered for someone to lead them, make the decisions they fear, the bold ones that bring chaos, death, and war. I’m momentarily incensed by their limits—these frail toys that are all with which I have to play. These things that aren’t real like me.

Still, I prefer frail toys to nothing. I’ve had an abundance of nothing.

Nothing is Hell. Nothing is where MacKayla is now.

It’s in breaking things that you understand them.

It’s in understanding them that you control them.

The Unseelie tremble before me.

As will the world.

2

“Hey I heard you were a wild one”

CHRISTIAN MACKELTAR

Arlington Abbey. Despite my efforts, the fortress has fallen.

Although the deadly icefire no longer burns, I was unable to prevent the citadel’s destruction. The roof has collapsed and blackened timbers jut skyward, broken ribs of a once-great beast. Walls slump in graves of chalky ash and tumbled stone. The ancient sanctuary, built first on a *shian*, pagan temple, then church, is a ruin.

An inch of ice coats the lawn and the now cold bones of the abbey. Drawing moisture from the sky—Dublin has a veritable flood rain eternally waiting to fall, as if, on the day of creation, a vengeful god suspended an airborne ocean above the Emerald Isle—I’d shaped it with my wrath into a killing frost, and soared over the fortress, extinguishing the unnatural blue-black flames.

My efforts were not without price. I may be Fae but my back and shoulders burn from prolonged flight and my gut spasms, somehow still flawed from my repeated disembowelment on a cliff.

Beneath the fallen bastion is a labyrinthine underground city that houses a prison containing Cruce. As he has not yet exploded from the bowels of the earth, it’s a fair guess the subterranean stronghold still stands. Perhaps the surviving *sidhe*-seers can go to ground. At least the wall of the abbey directly above Cruce’s prison no longer teeters dangerously near the black hole, threatening the voracious anomaly’s exponential growth. I collapsed that wall inward with an airborne kick; now it’s dust, a good distance from the event horizon.

Shouts split the air as the *sidhe*-seers cry out the names of their dead and summon

aid for those still alive.

I fly over the abbey, a dark-winged shadow in a sky of forbidding thunderclouds, watching through narrowed eyes for movement on the battlefield. Those of Ryodan's men who fought in human or beast form to save the abbey now patrol the perimeter of the estate's great wall, prepared for the next attack. Though this assault has ended, another will come. The campaign to free Cruce has just begun.

I catch a shiver of stealthy movement in the corner of my eye. An Unseelie slithers beneath a mound of ice-covered, decapitated corpses. When it surges up into the path of a *sidhe*-seer seeking survivors, I drop like stone, slash and maim until it moves no more.

When the *sidhe*-seer is safe, I cease my midair attack and, wings beating hard against the wind that came wed to the ice I called, drive myself up into the sky. After several more sweeps over the grounds in which I spy nothing of concern, I land in the midst of the battlefield, angling my wings back and up, close to my body so I won't have to spend hours scrubbing blood and guts from the infernal things before I sleep.

As I collect the corpse of a *sidhe*-seer who looks a mere child in death and may well have been, I stumble over an ice-covered, decapitated Unseelie, distracted by what remains of the many dead around me. Not their bodies. Something else. The dying leave a psychic imprint when they go; the body shifts, the soul expels a ghastly fart of one's strongest emotions, fears, and desires. Residue everywhere. I'm sticky with it. I feel their rage, hear screams no one else can, echoing in the air around me. I live with one foot in a world no one else can see.

Women shiver in the unnaturally cold, gusty air, clustered around a growing pile of their fallen sisters, watching me warily as I approach, stealing glances, looking hastily away. My faded jeans, hiking boots, and gray fisherman's sweater only make me look a wolf stalking near, wearing half a sheepskin, covering none of the frightening parts. I see myself as they do: an enormous man with a distant, wintry gaze that calls a price if engaged, majestic black-velvet wings, frosted torque, and tattoos slithering like dark snakes beneath my skin as they always do when I'm aroused by lust—murderous or otherwise—cradling a young, fair-haired girl. Looking, no doubt, as if I'm the one that killed her. My face appears more feral in a mirror than it feels on my bones. We could not be more incongruous together, the corpse and I. Yet we fit together perfectly. The only girl I'll ever take into my arms will either already be dead or soon end up that way.

One of the women stares too hard, meeting my gaze.

Her thoughts are clear but I'm not the one to defuse her battle-lust with aggressive

sex behind abbey hedges. *Bloody fool*, I tell her with my eyes, staring back. *Look away. Never look back.*

Blood trickles from the corners of her eyes before she closes them and presses a hand to her temple.

I hope I gave her a headache. She'll not look eyes with me again.

My first name is Death. My last, Keltar. My middle: Celibate.

I move into the small crowd. Women inhale sharply and pull back, making a wide corridor for me. There are a few among them, however, including the one who stared, that dart furtive glances my way. Though Unseelie, I fought beside them, put out the fire, so they rewrite my myth in their minds, romanticizing, domesticating the transmogrified Highlander. I keep my gaze fixed on the corpse I carry, my movements rigid and aloof, damning them for considering for even one mad moment the idea of having sex with an Unseelie prince.

I understand it, though.

War is funny like that. Adrenaline begets a need for more adrenaline until we're all junkies, until only when we're in danger do we feel no pain, only when we're locking jaws with death do we feel alive. Battle-hardened soldiers understand how to save the imperiled day.

But we will never again understand how to live the normal ones.

I gently deposit the dead girl's body on the pile. As I straighten from releasing my slight burden, I go motionless, sensing a newcomer. MacKayla Lane is near. I know her scent; it's sunshine on skin, the nearly intangible whiff of chlorine from a summer pool and something too muddy and complex to be named. She's always smelled that way to me; the promise of a hot new girlfriend that might just be a nut job.

I push through the *sidhe*-seers, circle the frozen fountain and head into the gloomy, dark morning, making for the south wing. The sky is so dense with thunderclouds, it's little better than twilight on the grounds. Mac's down somewhere beyond an iced, toppled pile of stones, although I can't fathom why she remains alone when her sisters are here. Her allegiance was unquestionable tonight, to the abbey, to Dani, to the human race. She belongs with them. Unlike me.

Someone closes a hand on my shoulder from behind. I knock the hand off and whirl, wings lifting, rustling in warning. Around my neck, my torque writhes, flares with a cold blue-black light. No one touches me. I say who. I say when.

“Hey,” says the *sidhe*-seer who stared too long.

I give her a look. It says, *Shut up and go away. And do it right now or die.*

She arches a brow. “Would it kill you to say ‘hey’ back?”

Her voice is beautiful, husky with a knife-edge rasp and a sexy French accent.

“Ah, a scintillating conversationalist,” I say sarcastically. “What will you dazzle me with next? A witty ‘What’s up?’ ”

“You made the ice that put out the fire,” she says.

I let my eyes fill with the strangeness of what I’ve become, silently daring her to look again, but she keeps her gaze fixed on my sternum. “I’m not a man for small talk. Say something that matters or leave.”

She stands her ground, unfazed by my efforts to drive her away. “I hear you’ve got a problem.”

“What would that be?” I’ll go see Mac, check on Dageus, then go home alone where I stay alone until there’s something for me to do that proves me more man than monster.

“When you have sex with a woman, she dies. Yet you need it like you need to breathe. I hear you won’t do it anymore because you don’t want to kill anyone. How’s that working out for you?”

What makes her think she can walk up to an Unseelie prince and instigate a glib conversation about sex? Who knows I’m not having sex and talks about me to *sidhe*-seers? “Where did you hear that?”

“Colleen. Your sister worries about you.”

Her hands form casual fists at her waist. This one has a cocky swagger and a bit of a death wish. Bloody Colleen, dishing with her bloody friends about her bloody brother. She and I are going to have a talk. “And you think you can help me with that?”

“It’s no more complicated than anything else in life. It takes discipline and I know discipline. I cut my teeth on it.”

She looks like she did, lean and long, with a strut of a walk and the clear definition of a six-pack beneath her torn, bloodstained tank. Beneath a shredded jacket, half-empty ammo belts crisscross her chest. Unlike the others, if she feels the biting wind I called to this meadow, she doesn’t shiver.

An F2000 assault rifle rests on a frayed strap over her arm, blood-crusting knives are tucked into her waistband, her boots. Her right cheek is bruised and split, her knuckles are raw, and her lower lip is spattered with dried blood. She moves closer to me and leans in. I drop my head forward and breathe smoke and battle-sweat, blood and woman. I catch the hint of heather soap. Colleen says they make it the old way at the abbey. It reminds me of the Highlands, of Tara, of innocence offered and taken, and death.

“Kiss me,” she says, staring at my mouth. “You know you want to. I saw how you looked at me.”

My gaze rests on her blood-spattered lips. Lush, pink, her mouth is Eros crusted with Thanatos. I miss kissing. I need now, more than ever before, to release the storm of sexual and emotional energy inside me. “I want to do much more than that.”

“I won’t let you.” She shifts her weight, swinging her rifle behind her back. “Not yet.”

“You can’t stop me.” No one can. And there’s the rub. A kiss would lead to a fuck and it would be her last because I can’t control myself. I drain a woman of life in bed. It’s odd to stare into eyes that never meet yours. It’s enough to give a man a God-complex. Her pupils dilate, widen then narrow again, with a shimmer of banked fire. Not deterred—intrigued. This one likes dancing on a high wire.

She wets her lips, tastes the dried blood and scrubs it away with the back of her hand. It doesn’t work, just smears more blood on her face. “A single kiss. Then walk away. Discipline begins. You think I have nothing to teach you. You think no one does. I thought that once, too. Maybe you’re right. Maybe you’re wrong. Maybe you’re a coward. Try the kiss.”

Dark eyes meet mine in level challenge. The message is clear. She’ll stare at me until she bleeds again.

“You want to measure your power by the power of those with whom you play. It turns you on.” I sneer.

“Am I supposed to be turned on by mediocrity?”

“You’re supposed to be turned on by a *human*. Get your bloody kicks somewhere else.” Twin drops of crimson appear in the corners of her eyes. I pivot and turn away.

“Right. Go on then,” she flings at my back. “Sure, you’ll never fail—if you never try. Hell of a life, that. When you’re ready to put on your big-boy pants, you know

where to find me.”

“My pants and what’s in them are already too big for you,” I say coolly. She wants to tempt me, lead me down a dark path that will end with me carrying the sin of yet another woman’s death on my conscience, all because she wants to play with the big, powerful, dangerous man. It’s not about me. It’s about her. She needs to pull her head out of her ass.

She laughs and walks off, confident, sexy, sure-footed on the slippery ice, like she expects me to turn and look. I know, because I turn and look, unwillingly appreciating the fluid, aggressive grace of her spine, the lean muscle of her legs, the curve of her ass.

Then I lope across the frost-covered grass to find Mac, in a foul mood. Once I’m turned on, I stay that way for a long time. Though pumped by a human heart, my blood runs Unseelie prince, twisted and unquenchable.

I slam a fist to my chest directly above that chambered beast and remind myself it was born Highlander and Highlander it will remain.

“Christian!” Mac’s voice is an urgent whisper.

I hurry to join her. We will face whatever our next battle is together.

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3

“Welcome to my house”

MAC

It’s dark. I can’t breathe. I can’t see.

Blind, I exist in a void, a tightly compressed Mac-in-the-Box, waiting for someone to crank my handle.

The body I don’t have tries frantically to gulp air.

Though I no longer have a mouth, somehow I scream and scream.



4

“What a Wonderful World”

MacKayla’s memory is mine. Not all, but enough; those ways in which she interacted with the physical world.

I know where Barrons keeps his car keys and that the mirror in the study on the first floor of the bookstore is the booby-trapped passage to his underground lair. I know how to navigate it; I once helped her gain entry. I know exactly how she takes her coffee, applies her makeup, does her hair, the way she greets and speaks with her adopted mother, her false father. I understand every nuance of what to say and do to pass myself off as Barrons’s Rainbow Girl.

Her body memory is also mine. Driving a car presented no challenge. Navigating the icy terrain is different but not difficult. The cold, however, is unpleasant and makes me shiver. I share her distaste for inclement weather and snow.

I glide across the wintry, windy abbey grounds, moving more surely inside my flawed bag of muscle and bone with each step. I’d like to sink within, pry open Mac’s box and murder her after a splendid afternoon of tea and torture for taking this vessel so for granted that she abused, neglected, and risked it at every turn. The vessel that was meant to be mine from the moment I inhabited it.

It’s not strong enough. She should have done better. Because of her frailties, I embark on life handicapped.

The first of my victims hurries toward me through the gloom, another broody conflicted fool that reviles the gift of power he was given. The power I would strip from him if I could.

“Christian.” I infuse my whisper with urgency.

When he appears from behind the rubble of charred, ice-dusted stone, I’m struck by the keen desire to possess his body. The undeserving prick’s vessel is superior to mine. Might I, like my former incarnation—the corporeal copy of the *Sinsar Dubh* that has since crumbled to dust on a slab—possess another’s skin via physical contact? Might I dump myself within and hold it? Might Christian be

capable of containing the enormity that I am without rapidly deteriorating to the point of uselessness?

The body I have is certain yet flawed.

Christian's is not flawed yet not certain.

MacKayla would call it the old bird-in-the-hand or bird-in-the-bush adage.

I giggle at the thought of MacKayla. She has neither birds nor bushes. She's in Hell and I put her there. Through desire, lust, greed, and supremacy.

Christian looks at me strangely, wings rustling in the cold breeze. "Mac?"

"Nervous laugh. I always think I'll get used to how you look." He accepts the excuse, too consumed by self-loathing to be focused on the world. And why wouldn't he die tonight? He believes the world populated by obvious monsters. The most dangerous of us are the least obvious. He relies on his skill as a lie detector, reading and judging the conflicting emotions of others.

Pity for him, I suffer none. Reading me is impossible. His scales can't weigh the stuff of which I'm made.

"How is Dani—er, Jada? Is she all right?"

I left her alive. There are the unworthy who will die sooner, and the worthy audience/interesting prey who will die later. Existence without mirrors, without games, is an endless yawn. "She'll be all right. Ow!" I say, clutching suddenly at an eye. "Ow," I exclaim again.

"What's wrong, Mac?"

"Datted wind! I think a splinter of wood flew into my eye. Can you look?"

"It's too bloody dark out here to see anything."

Above us, clouds roll, crash together, and the sudden booming is like knives in my ears. "Well, try. It feels like a blasted boulder. Christian, help me!" I tilt my head back and squint up at him, resisting the desire to clap my hands over my ears. He moves in, puts his hand on my face, and that's when I strike.

I reach inside my jacket for my spear, my lovely, lovely spear that is my most prized and loathed possession, treasured because it will slay all those that must die so I may achieve my true destiny, despised because it could rot me from the inside with the tiniest of pricks, and yank it from my—

“Mac, hold still. I can’t do anything with you twisting and turning like that.”

I still beneath his touch, not because he proposed it, but because I’m rendered motionless by rage.

That bitch! That clever, fucking *bitch*! She’s ruined everything! EVERYTHING!

I recall Jada’s hands on me before I was fully fused into my new skin, touching me everywhere, undoing my ankle restraints first. Had she not freed my feet before patting other places, I’d have paid more attention. She’d lulled me with deception. Tricked me! Thighs. Breasts. Side of my ribs. “Fuck!” I explode. She freed my hands last, once she’d taken what was not hers to take.

The one thing I require to achieve my aims.

“I know it hurts but you’ve got to hold still, Mac,” Christian snaps.

He has no idea how it hurts. She took advantage of that first moment in which I wasn’t fully cocked and loaded. It wasn’t *fair*.

I’d just been born. I’d been as certain of the spear’s presence on my body, its weight in the shoulder holster beneath my jacket, as I was loath to touch it while acclimating to my new skin, so I’d not reached for it until now.

Only to find a gun tucked inside—not my spear at all.

I allow the useless weapon to slip from my fingers and drop to the ground, close my eyes and summon a spell. Mouth working soundlessly, I call forth one of my favorites.

“I can hardly get the damn thing out if you don’t—Mac, what the bloody hell are you—”

My hand is on his mouth, but not my hand alone. He speaks no more, his lips stitched by the greedy needles of a bloody crimson rune I summoned from *my* glassy lake, not hers. She never found hers. I made sure of it, keeping hers hidden through illusion and sleight of hand, subtle manipulation of her neural circuitry.

He stumbles, tries to back away, but I fling rune after rune at him. They latch hungrily to his neck, his arms, onto his wings, those beautiful, majestic wings that should be mine, which he didn’t deserve and doesn’t honor.

Clawing at himself, he crashes to the ice-dusted ground.

A dozen more runes fly from my hands as I murmur quietly. I sling them onto his body, where they leech to his clothing and skin, spread and grow, until the

Unseelie prince is immobilized by the same parasitic magic that fortified the Unseelie prison walls, runes nourished by the victim's attempt to fight them, growing stronger and larger with the least resistance. In no time at all the Highlander will be cocooned in a bloody, inescapable prison.

I'll give him something to brood about and a hellish eternity in which to do it. Cretin. Idiot.

"But I wanted to kill you," I whisper as I lick his face in all its bloody, suffering goodness. "I wanted to watch you die. I've not killed in this form. I want to know how it feels." I permit my essence to fully animate my face, backlight my eyes.

He stares at me with horror. He gets it, belatedly, who Mac really is. Who I am.

I AM.

I plaster him with more runes, putty them gently over his eyes, his forehead, plug his nose, then shove him to the ground. Perhaps I kick him a few times for good measure. I don't know, I don't care, my mind has already moved on. I may not have the spear—at the moment—but I will gather my enemies and store them until I do.

I pick him up and drag him behind the pile of rocks. I'll collect him before I leave the abbey, take him with me to my lair.

Perhaps I'll play with him before he dies. It is in breaking things that you understand them. I've always been a curious sort.

As I enter the demolished abbey from the rear, I keep my ears on the voices of *sidhe*-seers beyond the tumbled walls and my eyes focused for random opportunity.

It's everywhere.

Here, I scrape ice from a box of rat poison used to protect the fortresses' larders. There, I find a half-standing pantry containing ice-slicked, corked jugs of water from their artesian well. The two meet in a lovely drink of hemorrhagic death. No guarantee it will be imbibed or that enough will be drunk. But there's a possibility it will. It's enough to entertain.

I move carefully over piles of slippery stone and splintered beams. Slip east, then down, knowing the way because my erstwhile host walked this path while I siphoned impressions from the leaky sieve of her mind.

Below. Below. I would so prefer not to go below to the catacomb in which my prior incarnation was housed for SO FUCKING LONG I THOUGHT I WOULD GO INSANE. But I didn't. I kept my cool, calm, collected self and waited for the right moment, amputating myself from within the *Sinsar Dubh*'s covers as it was being carried, slipping out the door unnoticed, so to speak, the ultimate sleight of hand.

I stop outside the closed doors of the cavern. Long ago the king sealed and unsealed the doors of his great citadel in the Unseelie prison, frequently during his time of endless experimentation trying to recreate the Song of Making. For such an obsessive entity, he's a careless bastard. Many of his memories are mine. Trapped inside the cavern, held immobile by his sticky spiderweb of runes, such knowledge did me no good. From outside the cavern it's quite possibly all I need in order to contain (then kill!) the vestiges of my former self that cannot be permitted to exist within Cruce.

I speak the spell that once opened and closed the ancient doors of the king's personal demesne, and as I expected, the towering portals swing wide. Unlike the idiot king, I rarely use the same protection spell twice.

In the shadowy interior a prince rises, glides toward the open entrance. The last time MacKayla saw him, Cruce was imprisoned. He is no longer. He's a giant of a Fae, with enormous black wings dusted with an ornate design of sparkling iridescent flecks, a body of brutal strength and delicious perfection. He was made to rule, to crush, to conquer. Fury ignites my blood. His superb vessel should be mine.

"Cruce," I say as I step across the threshold.

He stops, assesses me. "MacKayla. It was not you I thought would come."

My spear, my lovely spear, I was eager to kill him. To take from him what I can't have for myself. Now I can only contain and store him with the bastard Highlander until one of the two deadly hallows are mine.

Still, I see no need to hasten to the endgame. Endgames are so anticlimactic.

It's over.

Then there you are.

Bored again.

"Did you think I wasn't listening? You offered me the world," I say. "You said I would be your queen." Cruce thinks I'm Mac. My eyes are green. Currently. "You

have the *Sinsar Dubh*.”

He’s wary. “That should make you fear me.”

“Should it?” I know better. I’d been forced to leave behind half the magic I possessed to transfer myself into Isla O’Connor the night I escaped the abbey, but I’d cleverly embedded the majority of my prior self into the covers of the Book and planted a spell in the pages so that if they were ever read, the sentience I’d forsaken would cease to exist and crumble to dust. I will never permit another *me* to walk free in the world. I know what I’m capable of.

“The king said me becoming him, you becoming my queen, wasn’t the only possibility,” Cruce probes. “I have thought long on that. What did he mean, MacKayla? Why did he seem to think the magic of our race might prefer you?”

He’s wondering what power MacKayla possesses that she was able to open the king’s doors. He was interred before my self-flagellating vessel discovered me inside her, hence doesn’t know *I* stand before him. I stop a few paces from the great pretender who lived in Faery for half a million years as a Seelie prince, only to be exposed as the last made Unseelie prince, while I spent an eternity in solitary confinement. Now *I’m* the great pretender and he’s the one who will be imprisoned. “We must trust one another if we are to rule this planet together.”

“Ah, now you seek to rule it with me?”

“I freed you, didn’t I?” Toying with Cruce amuses me. He can sift. I can’t. He’s technically more powerful in that ability alone, and when I best him it will prove that my mind is so superior it doesn’t matter what power those around me possess. Everyone falls to me eventually. He’s a cretin. Idiot. MacKayla would never have said “rule.” She would have said something inoffensive like “guide.” That was his first and only red flag. Those that fail to protect themselves deserve any harm that befalls them. You are your own kingdom. Guard it. Or lose it.

“Why is that?”

“I believe you absorbed the spells from the Book, but it did not possess you. Is that true?” I know it for fact. Aside from a few redundancies, spells, music, wards, runes, he has nothing to compete with the enormous sentience of me. Although some of what he absorbed from reading the Book is equal to what I possess, it won’t matter. He won’t see his demise coming.

He hesitates briefly then nods, eyes narrowed.

“Then come with me now, and hurry. Our world is in danger. The Fae court has no ruler. If you can get them under control and help us with the black holes, the

others will accept you.”

Ah, there it is, what I wanted to see in his eyes. Interest, the belief that he has the possibility of a grand future. Desire. I know what impeded desire feels like. I know what Hell is. I will rain it down on this planet and everything on it.

“You said I raped you. You despised me,” Cruce says silkily.

“A minor offense. I’ve changed since then.” And how. There’s little satisfaction in imprisoning an already imprisoned mind. It’s the free ones, the hungry ones, those that fight, those with great ambition, that are so much fun to amputate and torture. They take the longest to break.

He studies me a moment. “Then kiss me, MacKayla, and take back my name.”

Now that the doors are open, he thinks to touch and thereby sift simple MacKayla Lane away from here, where he might interrogate her at his leisure. He senses a trap, just the wrong one. Like most powerful beings, he overestimates himself, and co-authors his own demise.

I move near, tip back my head and wet my lips.

When he steps forward, mouth descending, arms extending, I slam both hands into his chest, plastering handfuls of dripping crimson runes to his skin, preventing him from sifting, freezing him in place.

His eyes flare and he roars with rage, struggling against the runes, which of course only makes them stronger, faster.

I slap a rune onto his mouth, stitching it closed.

Moving with the heightened speed that eating Unseelie flesh bestowed on my vessel, I slam rune after rune onto his body, cover his mouth, then use one of my knives to hack his wings from his body and fillet them into tiny bits. Like the day I dismembered the Gray Woman, I slice and slash in a frenzied rush of power and the mighty Cruce falls before me. Despite his superior form, no one is superior to *me*. He is nothing. With MacKayla’s body, I can carve reality into whatever shape I desire.

I AM.

I slice, sever. Blood runs. Ebon feathers fall. The bird in the bush may not be mine but I can cripple and break it.

I strip the three amulets from his neck, drop them around mine, summon more

runes and finish spinning his bloody cocoon.

Slowly. Bit by carefully chosen bit. To make absolutely certain he's aware of everything that has happened, and is happening. I watch his eyes, drink his despair, blot his vision last. His suffering is exquisite.

WE ARE DESIRE, LUST, GREED AND THE PATH WE CHOOSE TO SUPREMACY.

Not one thing less. Not one thing more.

Those that conquer.

Take notes. Once you truly, deeply, intimately understand what I'm saying, you're that much harder to victimize.

Then the game, for me, becomes that much more fun.

BETRAYED

When my mother first discovered I could freeze-frame—which isn't nearly as cool as teleporting, it just means I can move so fast no one can see me, and they feel only a breeze as I whiz by—she began tying me to stuff to keep me close to her.

When I was really little just about anything worked: a chair, a table, the sofa where she would park me to watch cartoons while she'd frown over job ads in the paper.

I don't know how she supported us in those early years but somehow we got by. Times got leaner, though. Food was mostly canned beans and potted meat; there was no more of that sweet creamed corn I so loved.

One day I figured out I could untie myself. Mom always said I was too smart for my own good, walking early, picking up big words and talking way before I should.

She bought a dog leash the next morning, a pretty one with pink rhinestones. It

must have cost much more than she could afford to spend, but it was for her daughter, not a dog.

I snapped it within a week.

She fetched thick rope and became an expert at tying complicated knots.

But I was strong and fast and the rope frayed and split in no time. She'd say with an exasperated laugh—"Danielle Megan O'Malley, my little darling, you're going to be as strong as ten men one day! What on earth did I give birth to a superhero?"—and I'd preen.

She had a lot of rules for me. The world was a bad place, she said, full of bad things that hunted for little girls like me. I was special and she had to protect me, and keep me hidden.

Top on her list was no freeze-framing beyond the house. I was never to go out any of the windows or doors. OUTSIDE was a country I wasn't allowed to visit until I was OLDER—both magical words that I heard capitalized and the color of warm butterscotch when she said them. To discourage it, she kept the shades tightly drawn, shutting out all the interesting things to see.

But I'd peek when she wasn't watching and OUTSIDE was irresistible—there were children and puddles to splash around in and sunshine and fog and flowers and bikes and things happening, and everything was always changing, like you were living in a TV show and you got to discover the plot as you went along, even make it up and shape it yourself.

I wasn't always great with her rules. She caught me in the yard more than a few times.

One day after she found me sitting on the front stoop, watching girls jumping rope in the yard next door, she tied me to the fridge then went and bought a thick chain and screwed a heavy bolt into the sofa. She padlocked the chain around my waist.

An hour later I smashed the lumpy green couch to smithereens, dragging it behind me, trying to freeze-frame through the doorway to the kitchen.

She stood at the kitchen counter making dinner and I giggled and giggled because I thought it was so funny to see the couch all crooked and skewed with the stuffing poking out, but she got angry and said things I never wanted to hear her say again so, for a while that felt like years to me but was probably weeks, I stayed wherever she put me until she told me I could move.

It was inevitable OUTSIDE would get me again; sneaking a peek behind the

curtains, spying an ice cream vendor pushing his cart with dozens of children crowded around, licking their cones and spooning up their gooey sundaes and allowed to be OUTSIDE, and I knocked them over like little bowling pins, snatched up a whole tub of chocolate fudge caramel for myself and was back inside the house before Mom even knew I was gone. All the vendor saw was kids falling all over the sidewalk and maybe noticed a tub of ice cream missing but I'd already figured out that when grown-ups couldn't explain something, they pretended it hadn't happened.

I almost got away with it.

I would have gotten away with it. I even had a plan for how to get rid of the empty tub.

She brought my lunch into the living room.

I shoved the tub of ice cream behind a chair but she stayed and talked to me while I ate my beans and the ice cream melted and puddled out and she said those angry things again and I cried so hard I thought my tummy would split.

I crossed-my-heart-hope-to-die swore I would never disobey her rules again. And most especially that I would never, never go OUTSIDE.

She cried then, too.

A few days later she came home from the grocery store with hardly any food but she had a bunch of tools and bars and sheets of metal. She told me we didn't have any more money and she'd sold everything we could sell, so she had to go back to work.

She was getting a dog to watch over me while she was out and she was going to build a very special cage for it. She'd even learned to use a blowtorch and hammer to do it. I thought she was terribly clever and exciting!

I knew it was going to be a very special big dog because the cage was ginormous. I knew why she had to build it inside: it was three times as wide as any of our doors! Shortly before it was done, I played inside the cage, imagining all the fun I was going to have with my new, very best friend. With a best friend it would be a lot easier to resist the lure of OUTSIDE.

I wasn't as strong then as I am now. My strength increased as I matured, along with my other senses. But I knew the dog we were getting was going to be very, very strong because the bars on the cage were as big around as my mother's arm and inside she bolted a thick collar and a heavy chain to the floor. She said the dog might have to be restrained sometimes when we had company.

We never had company. I began to think I was the only one excited about the new addition to our family. While she worked on the cage, I'd dream up names for our dog and try them out on her, and her eyes would get strange and her lips would pull down.

I've always slept hard.

One night my mother gave me a bath, dried and brushed my hair, and we played games on the rickety kitchen table until I nearly fell asleep on my stool. Then she carried me to her bed where I lay my head on her pillowcase—the one with the little ducks—and I put my hands on her face and stared at her with sleepy eyes because I loved watching her while I fell asleep, and she held me so close and so tight, snuggled up in her good mom-smell that I knew I was the most important thing to her in the whole world, and I slipped off to happy dreams.

The next morning I woke up with a collar around my neck, chained on a small mattress inside the dog's cage.

5

“The days are bright and filled with pain”

JADA

She stood by the edge of the mattress in the study on the silent, otherwise empty first floor of Barrons Books & Baubles, frowning down at the body draped in nearly transparent pieces of silvery cloth.

Not that Ryodan knew she was frowning or even that she was in the room. Although his body shivered with agony, the rise and fall of his chest was nominal; she'd counted his breaths, twice a minute. His pulse was nonexistent. He'd either gone into a deep meditation or someone, no doubt Barrons, had put him into a magical, healing sleep.

Unwrapping a protein bar, she knelt by the mattress, lifted the edge of one of the pieces of fabric and inhaled sharply. Raw, blistered flesh oozed pinkish liquid. She carefully released the edge and lifted another.

He'd burned himself to the bone in places, to keep her safe, while she'd tried to

rescue someone she'd known full well on some level wasn't there.

“The wound I refused to dress,” she whispered, for a moment fourteen again, chained in a dungeon with Ryodan trying to get her to face the atrocities of her life, stare them down cold, acknowledge and make some kind—any kind—of peace with them; his brand of tough love, the only thing that'd had the slightest chance of penetrating her formidable armor. She'd told herself it wasn't concern but manipulation. Her thoughts and feelings about the man had always been at odds. She'd idolized him. Craved his attention and respect. Never trusted him. Yet what he'd done tonight . . . she could see nothing the mighty Ryodan might have gained from it.

She'd made her own kind of peace by freeze-framing into the future, faster than the wind, faster than any pain could follow. Seeking adventure, sensation, stimulation, because as long as she was feeling something new, she didn't feel anything old. *Past is past*, she'd crowed to anyone who'd listened.

She knew Ryodan's words by heart. She knew everything he'd said by heart. Few adults had given her useful words. Tucked into a Mega brain behind a gamine grin and insouciant swagger, they'd always been treasured.

The wound you refuse to dress is one that will never heal. You gush lifeblood and never even know why. It will make you weak at a critical moment when you need to be strong.

Tonight her unhealed wounds had cost her. And him.

She'd watched him die once, gutted by the Crimson Hag. Somehow, miraculously, he'd returned from the dead, whole and good as new. She wasn't worried that he might die from these burns.

Regardless, looking at him in this condition made her feel sick.

She closed her eyes, reliving the abbey under attack, the bloodbath of a battle, so many dead, cut down so young, the hellish fire, the moment she'd felt her mind snap.

Shazam.

Ryodan stumbling from the inferno, carrying her and her stuffed animal, both unharmed.

Which brought her to thoughts of the completed tattoo at the base of her spine, the cellphone in her pocket, and the certainty Ryodan could find her no matter where she went.

Of course, now that she had what she'd so desperately wanted, she couldn't justify pursuing a personal agenda.

Forgotten in her hand, the protein bar had melted and chocolate ran warm and gooey through her fingers. She devoured it in two bites, barely chewing, licked her hand and pocketed the wrapper.

Her hands curled into fists.

“Ryodan, we've got problems. Mac's gone. She tried to save us from the Sweeper by using the *Sinsar Dubh*. When she took a spell from it, the Book possessed her. I can't find Barrons. I don't know if Mac is still in there somewhere. I *do* know the Book will destroy everything it comes in contact with.” She paused then said flatly, “Logic dictates I kill her at the earliest opportunity.”

Which, technically, had passed.

She'd taken Mac's spear before she'd undone her restraints, erring on the side of caution. She should have attacked the moment the Book revealed itself with its nightshade-toxic gaze. She was faster and the Book had been having obvious acclimation problems, struggling to get off the table, swaying slightly as it found footing. She could have stabbed it with the spear, cleaved it in half with her sword, ensuring the body that held the *Sinsar Dubh* would rot and die.

Mac's body.

Eventually.

Slowly and horrifically.

A woman who lived by the motto *carpe momentum et cetera sequeinter*, she'd never wanted to seize a moment less.

She knew why and told the unconscious man heatedly. “Because friends don't give up on friends. They *never* give up.”

The body on the mattress shivered but said nothing.

Lost in the Silvers versus lost in a Book: Jada didn't perceive the odds of rescue as substantially disparate. The fallout, however, could be catastrophically different: one girl, never to be seen again, versus the earth's total domination and destruction. Assuming the black holes didn't destroy it first.

“Lor told me you didn't know where I'd gone,” she told the silent room. “It wasn't your fault. It wasn't Mac's either. People need to stop thinking they're responsible

for my actions. It wasn't like I needed to be rescued. I've never needed to be rescued." She'd always found a way to save herself.

Still, she knew intimately the despair of day after day passing, followed by nights cold, hungry, alone; of belief dying bit by bit.

Mac had sacrificed herself, to ensure Jada's survival. If Mac hadn't opened the *Sinsar Dubh* and used a spell to save them, the Sweeper would have sent horribly "fixed" versions of Mac and Jada out into the world, which might have been every bit as deadly as the Book being unleashed on it. And who could say the Sweeper's work on Mac's brain wouldn't have freed the *Sinsar Dubh* anyway? There'd been no easy, good choices tonight, only the lesser of evils—two women destroyed or one.

Over her dead body was Mac waiting for a rescue that never came.

As she stood and moved toward the door, Ryodan muttered something too garbled for even her acute hearing to decipher.

She glanced back. "You shouldn't be trying to talk. Rest. Heal. Get back on your feet."

He muttered again, jerking with such violence that several pieces of spelled cloth protecting his skin fell away. When she moved to the mattress and knelt to replace them, he blew the cloth from his face and went into instant convulsions from the effort.

She didn't tell him to stop trying to speak. Ryodan made his own decisions. Whatever he wanted to say, he badly wanted her to hear.

When he was still again, she bent near his mouth. His once beautiful face was a charred, monstrous mask, eyelids blistered, lips burned to a raw gash.

She'd done this to him. Her meltdown. Her heart the Sweeper had deemed flawed. She'd always excelled at the pretending game. But she'd taken it too far this time. She'd lost sight of what was imaginary and wasn't. And it had cost them all, those she hated caring about yet had never been able to stop caring about.

He spoke carefully then passed out so hard he no longer shivered. It had taken all his strength to murmur a single sentence.

Jada gently replaced the spelled cloth, eyes shining, torn between hushed awe and a fierce desire to snicker.

He'd said, *Holy psychotic PCs, Robin, we've a murderous MacBook on the loose!*

“Batman,” she said, hoping he was in a place of no pain. “This time around, *I’m* wearing the cape.”

She took the stairs three at a time to Mac’s room on the fourth floor.

It wasn’t there.

A room still occupied the location; it just wasn’t the same one she’d been in earlier. The cozy, messy bedroom had been supplanted in her absence by a parlor with a red crushed-velvet sofa, a faded Persian rug, crystal lamps, and a cheery fire burning in an enameled hearth.

She walked back out into the stairwell and glanced up, eyes narrowed.

When she’d left earlier to follow Mac, the stairwell hadn’t continued past the fourth floor. There’d been only a ceiling with elaborate crown molding where now a dizzying staircase ascended.

From years Silverside, Jada was accustomed to shifting spatial dimensions. Barrons Books & Baubles housed at least one powerful, distorting Silver, if not more; a mystery to be explored when time permitted. She found the Nine’s secrets intriguing to an obsessive-compulsive degree.

She located the bedroom on the sixth floor, on the left side of the corridor, not the right, shrugged out of her coat, stripped off her shirt and swapped it for one of Mac’s. Her clothing was stained with dried blood, entrails, and dusted with the pungent yellow residue of the zombie-eating-wraith straitjacket she’d briefly worn. The combined stench was overwhelming her sense of smell, diluting it. After wiping her face with a damp towel, she scrubbed down her pants and boots as well.

She grabbed Mac’s black leather biker jacket and began transferring her many weapons, protein bars, and last remaining energy pod. While strapping on the sword and tucking the spear into a thigh holster, she spotted the cuff she’d given Mac on the table by the bed.

She had no idea why Mac had taken it off but she wasn’t about to leave it lying around. She’d risked a great deal to take it. Crossing the room in a few long-legged strides, she shoved the cuff onto her wrist and pushed it up under the sleeve of her jacket.

A charred stuffed animal, wedged between pillows on the bed, stuffing-guts spilling from its slashed belly, watched her every move with round, shiny,

reproachful black eyes.

I see you, Shazam.

She shook herself briskly. Emotion was deadly. Plans and objectives, clarifying.

She tucked the stuffing back in, tugged the edges closed and gently placed the teddy bear on a high shelf.

Then she turned, dashed down the stairs and burst out the back door, into the gloomy Dublin dawn.

She used her left hand, her sword hand, to trace the same spell she'd etched earlier to pass through the whirling tornado surrounding Barrons Books & Baubles. Black veins flared beneath her skin, licked up into her wrist, and her hand went ice cold. Many years ago she'd stabbed a Hunter with the Sword of Light and something had seemed to seep through her weapon into her fingers. She'd learned Silverside that her left hand cast better, stronger spells. It often itched and tingled, and sometimes at night she'd wake up to find her hand cold and black. Shazam had professed a special fondness for being scratched behind his ears with her left hand, claiming it felt different, but when pressed for more information, the grumpy, cranky beast had merely flashed a Cheshire smile and refused further discourse.

Shazam. Her heart hurt. Grief was a silenced wail that had no beginning or end, just a long, agonizing middle.

Inhaling deeply, she focused on her city.

She'd not seen a single person since leaving the warehouse with the exception of Ryodan, and suspected Barrons was out searching for Mac, perhaps for her as well. The streets were empty, silent, glistening gray beneath a bank of dense thunderclouds. Were it a normal morning—if there was such a thing anymore—there'd have been both Fae and humans milling in the street, but any human who'd seen the Fae gathering en masse last night had either joined up and been killed or gone to ground, fearing a death march similar to the one on Halloween when the walls between worlds had been destroyed.

As she passed the church where she'd nearly frozen to death, she scanned the black hole suspended over the rubble, assessing size and circumference. It was larger by nearly a third, exuding a gentle pull of distortion. Mac had told her she could hear music coming from the black holes, but even with her extraordinary hearing Jada couldn't detect the faintest vibration.

She considered her current problems: Black holes devouring the world, the Song of Making lost, nearly half her *sidhe*-seers injured or dead, another attack on the

abbey imminent until Cruce was freed or destroyed, the Unseelie king and former queen absent, Mac possessed by the *Sinsar Dubh*.

Banner day in Dublin. No time to print a daily.

It occurred to her that if they could find a way to control Mac/the *Sinsar Dubh*, it might not be entirely a bad thing that she'd opened the Book. If they didn't hurry up and find a way to patch the black holes on their world, or at least find a way to stop them from growing, the human race had no future, and allegedly the *Sinsar Dubh*, scribed by the Unseelie king, contained information about the legendary Song of Making. She'd pondered that allegation at length, not certain she believed it was possible because, according to all the myths she'd uncovered about the history of the Fae royals, including the many oral stories she'd collected Silverside, the king had never succeeded in recreating it—so how could anything about it possibly be in his Book? Maybe the Book contained clues? Bits and pieces the king had collected hinting at the true nature of the song that, with Dancer's help, might be analyzed and improved upon? Speaking of Dancer, she had to somehow get word to him that Mac had gone postal. She wondered if he still checked their hidden cubby at the O'Connell Street Post Office, and made a mental note to drop him a message there, assuming she didn't run into him before then. He had the uncanny knack of showing up whenever she thought really hard about him.

She eased up into the slipstream and vanished. In that higher dimension, the world slid by without friction. Buildings, people, their many messy emotions, disappeared beyond a beautiful, starry tunnel. If only she could eat enough to maintain the metabolism to fuel it, she'd live in the slipstream and never come down—a superhero, protecting her world, unseen, untouched.

She was nearly to Chester's when she crashed into a brick wall she'd not sensed—which meant one of the Nine—and dropped back down.

Scent came before sight: Jericho Barrons. She ricocheted off his chest and went flying. With those lightning-fast reflexes that could pluck her out of freeze-frame, he grabbed her arm and stopped her from careening violently down the street.

“Dani,” he said.

She tipped her head back and stared up into eyes black as midnight, a dark, savage face. Every hair on her body stood up on end, as if charged by a sudden surge of electricity. He threw off the same kind of primal energy as Ryodan. She'd once crushed on Jericho Barrons violently. Before she realized he and Mac belonged together like earth and sky, night and day, fire and ice. She'd found tatters of legends about the Nine on some of the worlds she'd traveled Silverside, but never

managed to find an origin myth, only songs and tales of nine merciless warriors who battled for gain and, despite dying, came back again and again. Unkillable, unstoppable, unbreakable, she hungered to be those many “uns” herself. No matter the price. She snatched her hand away and smoothed her hair. “It’s Jada.”

“Have you seen Mac?” he said.

That was Barrons. No small talk. She appreciated it and answered in kind. “She’s been possessed by the *Sinsar Dubh*.”

Barrons went so still she lost him in the early morning gloom. Just when she’d decided he’d left his disembodied voice murmured, “So, that’s why I can no longer feel her.” Then he was there again, morphing out of the brick wall that had been behind him. He could be a perfect chameleon when he chose. “Are you certain?” he said so softly that she shivered, because she knew what soft meant from this hard, implacable man. It meant every ounce of his energy had just been diverted and channeled into a mother lode of a nuclear missile that was locked, loaded, and targeted on whatever had just offended him, and that he would expend no more energy than was strictly necessary to speak.

“Yes.”

His eyes darkened, eerie shadows swirled in his irises, and a muscle worked in his jaw. “How certain?”

“Unequivocally.” “What happened?” he said, a bare whisper. She tightened her ponytail, pulling it up higher. Her hair was curling again, or trying to. She hated it curly. It made her feel like Dani, out of control. Those at the abbey didn’t know the *Sinsar Dubh* was once again roaming Dublin, and she had little time to fortify what was left of the fortress against the next attack, whether instigated by those trying to free Cruce or Mac herself. “We have to get to the abbey, Barrons. We can talk on the way.”

He pulled out his cellphone, thumbed up a contact, and held the phone to his ear. “Do you feel the *Sinsar Dubh*?”

Jada heard a woman’s frantic voice carrying clearly from his phone. She knew that voice. She heard it in nightmares, crying, begging, and finally screaming. She shivered, reached for another protein bar and wolfed it down.

“Barrons, I’ve been trying to call you! I felt it about an hour ago! Here. In Dublin. What’s going on? You said it was locked up. How did it get out?”

“Where is it right now?”

“It headed north, into the country, then I lost it. Where are you? Where’s Mac? I’m coming with you.”

“No you’re not. Find your parents. Stay with them until you hear from me.”

“But M-Mom and D-Dad d-don’t know I’m alive,” Alina stammered.

“Fix that. And if you feel the *Sinsar Dubh* approaching, take Jack and Rainey to Chester’s and call me. If you can’t get to the club, go to ground wherever you can.”

“What’s going on?” Alina demanded. “I have a right—”

“Do what I said.” Barrons hung up.

Jada listened to the exchange with narrowed eyes, realizing the woman Mac had said was walking around Dublin looking and acting like her sister somehow was on Barrons’s autodial. He seemed to believe it really was Alina and, like Mac, the woman could sense the *Sinsar Dubh*. But he didn’t trust her entirely. Either that or he didn’t want one more liability to worry about.

“Mac’s headed for the abbey,” Barrons said.

Jada filed thoughts of Alina away for later perusal. They were entangled with far too many emotions to be entertained at the moment. They went into the same box that held so many other things that she would get to . . . one day.

By the time they got to Chester’s and climbed into a big black armored military Humvee, she was operating with her usual machine-like efficiency despite her many recent shocks and unhealed wounds.

Past was past. Tidying up one’s internal landscape was a luxury of the safe.

Safe was something she’d never been.

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****This text taken from an uncorrected proof*