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KAREN MARIE  
MONING  
SHADOWFEVER

A  
MACKAYLA LANE  
NOVEL

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SHADOWFEVER

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Karen Marie  
Moning

  
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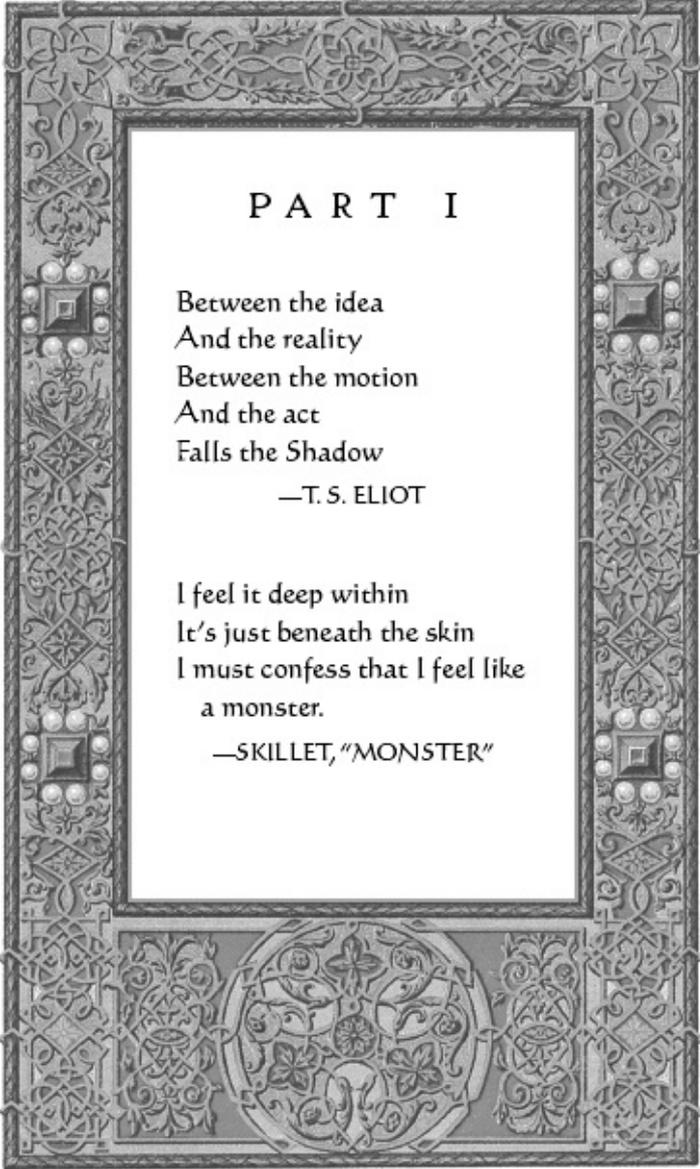
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*Acknowledgments*

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PART I

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow

—T. S. ELIOT

I feel it deep within  
It's just beneath the skin  
I must confess that I feel like  
a monster.

—SKILLET, "MONSTER"

YOU WISH TO KNOW ME?

---

POSIT YOURSELF AS THE PINPOINT CENTER OF ONE OF YOUR KALEIDOSCOPIES, AND GRASP TIME AS THE COLORFUL FRAGMENTS ERUPTING FROM YOU IN A MULTITUDE OF DIMENSIONS THAT CONSTANTLY EXPAND OUTWARD IN AN EVER-WIDENING, EVER-SHIFTING, INFINITE ARRAY. SEE THAT YOU CAN CHOOSE AND EXPAND FROM ANY OF THOSE UNCOUNTABLE DIMENSIONS AND THAT, WITH EACH CHOICE, THOSE DIMENSIONS WIDEN AND SHIFT AGAIN. INFINITY COMPOUNDED EXPONENTIALLY. UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS REALITY: THE FALSE GOD YOUR RACE WORSHIPS WITH SUCH BLIND DEVOTION. REALITY IMPLIES A SINGLE POSSIBLE.

YOU ACCUSE ME OF ILLUSION. YOU—WITH YOUR ABSURD CONSTRUCT OF LINEAR TIME. YOU FASHION FOR YOURSELF A PRISON OF WATCHES, CLOCKS, AND CALENDARS. YOU RATTLE BARS FORGED OF HOURS AND DAYS, BUT YOU’VE PADLOCKED THE DOOR WITH PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

PUNY MINDS NEED PUNY CAVES.

YOU CANNOT GAZE UPON TIME’S TRUE FACE ANY MORE THAN YOU CAN BEHOLD MINE.

TO APPREHEND YOURSELF AS THE CENTER, TO SIMULTANEOUSLY PERCEIVE ALL COMBINATIONS OF ALL POSSIBLES, SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO MOVE IN ANY DIRECTION—“DIRECTION” BEING A VERY LIMITED METHOD OF ATTEMPTING TO CONVEY A CONCEPT FOR WHICH YOUR RACE HAS NO WORD—*THAT IS WHAT IT IS TO BE ME.*

—CONVERSATIONS WITH THE *SINSAR DUBH*

Hope strengthens. Fear kills.  
Someone really smart told me that once.

Every time I think I'm getting wiser, more in control of my actions, I go slamming into a situation that makes me excruciatingly aware that all I've succeeded in doing is swapping one set of delusions for a more elaborate, attractive set of delusions—that's me, the Queen of Self-Deception.

I hate myself right now. More than I'd ever have thought possible.

I squat on the cliff's edge, screaming, cursing the day I was born, wishing my biological mother had drowned me at birth. Life is too hard, too much to handle. Nobody told me there'd be days like these. How could nobody tell me there'd be days like these? How could they let me grow up like that—happy and pink and stupid?

The pain I feel is worse than anything the *Sinsar Dubh* has ever done to me. At least when the Book is crushing me, I know it's not my own fault.

This moment?

*Mea culpa.* Beginning to end, all the way, I own this one, and there will never be any hiding from that fact.

I thought I'd lost everything.

How ignorant I was. He warned me. I had so much more to lose!

I want to die.

It's the only way to stop the pain.

Months ago, on a hellishly long night, in a grotto beneath the Burren, I wanted to die, to die, but it wasn't the same. Mallucé was going to torture me to death, and dying was the only chance I had of denying him that twisted pleasure. My death had been inevitable. I saw little point in drawing it out.

I'd been wrong. I'd given up hope and nearly died because of it.

I *would* have died—if not for Jericho Barrons.

He's the one who taught me those words.

That simple adage is master of every situation, every choice. Each morning we wake up and we get to choose between hope and fear and apply one of those emotions to everything we do. Do we greet the things that come our way with joy? Or suspicion?

*Hope strengthens ...*

Not once did I permit myself to feel any hope about the person lying facedown in a pool of blood. Not once did I use it to strengthen our bond. I let the onus of our relationship rest on broader shoulders. Fear. Suspicion. Mistrust drove my every action.

And now it's too late to take any of it back.

I stop screaming and begin to laugh. I hear the madness in it.

I don't care.

My spear sticks up, a cruel javelin, mocking me. I remember stealing it.

For a moment, I'm back in the dark, rain-slicked Dublin streets, descending into the sewer systems with Barrons, breaking into Rocky O'Bannion's private cache of religious artifacts. Barrons is wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. Muscles ripple in his body as he casts aside the sewer lid with the ease of a man tossing a Frisbee in the park.

He's disturbingly sexual, to men and women alike, in a way that sets your teeth on edge. With Barrons, you aren't sure if you're going to get fucked or turned inside out and left new, unrecognizable person, adrift with no moorings, on a sea with no bottom and no rules.

I was never immune to him. There were merely degrees of denial.

My respite is too brief. The memory vanishes and I am again confronted with the reality that threatens to shatter my hold on sanity.

*Fear kills ...*

Literally.

I can't say it. I can't think it. I can't begin to absorb it.

I hug my knees and rock.

*Jericho Barrons is dead.*

He lies on his stomach, motionless. He hasn't moved or breathed in the small eternity that I've been screaming. I can't sense him in his skin. On all other occasions, I've been able to feel him in my vicinity: electric, larger than life, vastness crammed into a tiny container. Genie in a bottle. That's Barrons: deadly power, stopper corking it. Barely.

I rock back and forth.

The million-dollar question: What are you, Barrons? His answer, on those rare occasions he gave one, was always the same.

*The one that will never let you die.*

I believed him. Damn him.

"Well, you screwed up, Barrons. I'm alone and I'm in serious trouble, so *get up!*"

He doesn't move. There's too much blood. I reach out with my *sidhe*-seer senses. I sense nothing on the cliff's edge but me.

I scream.

No wonder he told me never to call the number on my cell that he had programmed as IY—*If You're Dying*—unless I really was. After a time I begin to laugh again. He's not the one who screwed up. I am. Was I played or did I orchestrate this fiasco all by myself?

I thought Barrons was invincible.

I keep waiting for him to move. Roll over. Sit up. Magically heal. Cut me one of those hard looks and say, *Get a grip, Ms. Lane. I'm the Unseelie King. I can't die.*

That was one of my biggest fears, whenever I was indulging in any of a thousand about him: that he was the one who'd created the *Sinsar Dubh* to begin with, dumping all his evil into it, and he wanted it back for some reason but couldn't trap it himself. At one point or another, I'd considered everything: Fae, half Fae, werewolf, vampire, ancient cursed being from the dawn of time, perhaps the very thing he and Christian had tried to summon on Halloween at Castle Keltar—key part there being immortal, as in *unkillable*.

"Get up, Barrons!" I scream. "Move, damn you!"

I'm afraid to touch him. Afraid if I do, his body will be cooling noticeably. I'll feel the fragility of his flesh, the mortality of Barrons. "Fragility," "mortality," and "Barrons" all packed together in the same thought feels about as blasphemous as stalking through the

Vatican hammering upside-down crosses on the walls.

---

I squat ten paces from his body.

I stay back, because if I get close I'll have to roll him over and look in his eyes, and what they're empty like Alina's were?

Then I'll know he's gone, like I knew she was gone, too far beyond my reach to ever hear my voice again, to hear me say, I'm sorry, Alina, I wish I'd called more often; I wish I'd heard the truth beneath our vapid sister talk; I wish I'd come to Dublin and fought beside you, enraged at you, because you were acting from fear, too, Alina, not hope at all, or you would have trusted me to help you. Or maybe just apologize, Barrons, for being too young to have my priorities refined, like you, because I haven't suffered whatever the hell it is you suffered and then shove you up against a wall and kiss you until you can't breathe, do what I wanted to do the first day I saw you there in your bloody damned bookstore. Disturb *you* like you disturbed *me*, make you see me, make you want me—*pink* me!—shatter your self-control, bring you crashing to your knees in front of me, even though I told myself I'd never want a man like you, that you were too old, too carnal, more animal than man, with one foot in the swamp and no desire to come all the way out, when the truth was that I was terrified by what you made me feel. It wasn't what guys make girls feel, dreams of a future with babies and picket fences, but frantic, hard, raw loss of self, like you can't live without that man inside you, around you, with you all the time, and it only matters what *he* thinks of you, that the rest of the world can go to hell, and even then I knew you could change me! Who wants to be around someone that can *change* them? Too much power to let another person have! It was easier to fight you than admit that I had undiscovered places inside me that hungered for things that weren't accepted in any kind of world I knew, and the worst of it is that you woke me up from my Barbie-girl world and now I'm here and I'm wide awake, you bastard, couldn't be more awake, and you *left* me—

I think I'll scream until he gets up.

He was the one who told me not to believe anything was dead until I'd burned it, poked around in its ashes, then waited a day or two to see if anything rose from them.

Surely I'm not supposed to burn him.

I don't think there are any circumstances under which I could do that.

I'll squat.

I'll scream.

He'll get up. He hates it when I'm melodramatic.

While I wait for him to revive, I listen for sounds of scrabbling at the cliff's edge. I half expect Ryodan to drag his broken, bloody body up over the edge. Maybe he's not really dead either. After all, we're in Faery, maybe, or at least within the Silvers—who knows what realm this is? Might the water here have rejuvenating powers? Should I try to get Barrons to help it? Maybe we're in the Dreaming and this terrible thing that has happened is a nightmare, and I'll wake up on a couch in Barrons Books and Baubles and the illustrious, infuriating owner will raise a brow and give me that look; I'll say something pithy, and life will be lovely, chock-full of monsters and rain again, just the way I like it.

I squat.

No scrabbling in the stones and shale.

The man with the spear in his back doesn't move.

My heart is full of holes.

He gave his life for me. Barrons gave his life for me. My self-serving, arrogant, constant jackass was the constant rock beneath my feet, willing to die so I could live.

Why the hell would he do that?

How do I *live* with that?

A terrible thought occurs to me, so awful that for a few moments it eclipses my grief: would never have killed him if Ryodan hadn't appeared. Did Ryodan set me up? Did he come here to kill Barrons, who was never invincible, merely difficult to kill? Maybe Barrons could be killed only in his animal form, and Ryodan knew he'd have to be in it to protect me. Was this an elaborate ruse that had nothing to do with me? Was Ryodan working with the LM and they wanted Barrons out of the way so I'd be easier to deal with, and the abduction of my parents was mere sleight of hand? *Look over there while we kill the man who threatens us all.* Or maybe Barrons had been cursed to live out some hellish sentence and could be slain only by someone he trusted, and he'd trusted me. Beneath all the cold arrogance, the mockery, the constant pushing, had he given over that most private part of himself to me—a confidence I never earned, as I couldn't have proven any more surely than if I'd stabbed him in the back?

Oh, gee, wait, I did. On Ryodan's word alone, I'd turned on him.

The accusation of betrayal in the beast's gaze hadn't been an illusion. It had been Jericho Barrons in there, staring at me from behind that prehistoric brow, baring his fangs, reproach and hatred blazing in his feral yellow eyes. I'd broken our unspoken pact. He'd been my guardian demon and I'd killed him.

Had he despised me for not seeing through the hide of the beast he'd worn to the man within?

*See me.* How many times had he said that to me? *See me when you look at me!*

When it mattered most, I'd been blind. He'd been dogging my every step, treating me with that characteristic Barrons' combination of aggression and animal possessiveness, and I never once recognized him.

I'd failed him.

He'd come to me in a barbaric, inhuman form, to keep me alive. He'd set himself up as IY regardless of what it might cost him, knowing he would be turned into a mindless, raging beast capable only of slaughtering everything in his immediate vicinity but for one thing.

Me.

God, that look!

I cover my face with my hands, but the image won't go away: beast and Barrons, his dark skin and exotic face, its slate hide and primal features. Those ancient eyes that saw so much and asked only to be seen in return burn with scorn: *Couldn't you have trusted me just once? Couldn't you have hoped for the best, just once? Why did you choose Ryodan over me? I was keeping you alive. I had a plan. Did I ever let you down?*

"I didn't know it was you!" I gouge my palms with my nails. They bleed for a brief moment, then heal.

But the beast/Barrons in my mind isn't done torturing me. *You should have. I took your sweater. I smelled you and granted you passage. I killed fresh, tender meat for you. I pissed around you. I showed you in this form, as in any other, that you are mine—and I take care of what is mine.*

Tears blind me. I double over. It hurts so bad I can't breathe, can't move. I hunch over, cu

in on myself, and rock.

---

Beyond the pain, if there is such a place, I know things.

Things like: According to Ryodan (if he's not a traitor, and if he is and somehow still alive I'll kill him as dead as we killed Barrons), I have a brand on the back of my skull placed there by the Lord Master, who probably still has my parents, because Barrons is here, so obviously he never got through to Ashford.

Unless ... time passes differently in the Silvers and he *did* have time to get to Ashford before I punched IYD, summoning him here to the seventh dimension I've been in since entering the Lord Master's slippery pink corridor back in Dublin.

I have no idea how long I was in the Hall of All Days or how much time passed in the real world while I sunned with Christian by the lake.

Once, courtesy of V'lane, I spent a single afternoon on a beach in Faery, with an illusion of my sister, and it cost me an entire month in the human world. When I returned, Barrons was furious. He'd chained me to a beam in his garage. I'd been wearing a hot-pink string bikini.

We fought.

I close my eyes and embrace the memory.

He stands there, furious, surrounded by needles and dyes, about to tattoo me—or, more accurately, *pretend* to tattoo me where he's already tattooed me but I haven't discovered yet—so he can track me if I ever decide to do something as stupid as agree to stay in Faery for any period of time again.

I tell him if he tattoos me, we're through. I accuse him of never feeling anything more than greed and mockery, being incapable of love. I call him a mercenary, blame him for losing his temper when he couldn't find me and trashing the store, and, while I scathingly concede that he might get an occasional hard-on, it's undoubtedly for something like money, an artifact, or a book—never a woman.

I remember every word of his reply: *Yes, I have loved, Ms. Lane, and although it's none of your business, I have lost. Many things. And, no, I am not like any other player in this game and will never be like V'lane, and I get a hard-on a great deal more often than occasionally. Sometimes it's over a spoiled little girl, not a woman at all. And, yes, I trashed the bookstore when I couldn't find you. You'll have to choose a new bedroom, too. And I'm sorry your pretty little world got screwed up, but everybody's does, and you go on. It's how you go on that defines you.*

In retrospect, I see through myself with pathetic ease.

There I am, chained to a beam, nearly naked, alone with Jericho Barrons, a man who is so far beyond my comprehension, but, God, he excites me! He plans to work slowly and carefully on my naked skin for hours. His hard, tattooed body is an unspoken promise of initiation into a secret world where I could feel things I can't begin to imagine, and I want him to work on me for hours. Desperately. But not to tattoo me. I goad him to the best of my naïve, sheltered abilities. I want him to take from me what I lack the courage to offer.

What a complicated, ridiculous, self-destructive feeling! Afraid to ask for what I want. Afraid to own up to my own desires. Driven by circumscription of nurture, not nature. I come to Dublin wearing shackles on my bonds. I'd been all nurture.

He was all nature—trying to teach me to change.

Like I said: degrees of denial.

He'd leaned into me, in that garage, sex and barely leashed violence, and when I'd felt hard-on, it made me feel so alive and wild inside that later I'd had to peel off my bikini and take care of myself in the shower again and again, fantasizing a very different outcome in that garage. One that had taken all night.

I'd told myself it was because I'd spent the day in close proximity to a death-by-sex Fantasy. Another lie.

He'd unchained me and let me go.

If I were chained to that beam now, I'd have no problem telling him exactly what I wanted. And it wouldn't involve unchaining me. At least not at first.

I focus through my tears.

Grass. Trees. Him.

He lies facedown. I need to go to him.

The earth is wet, muddy from last night's rain, from his blood.

I need to clean him. He shouldn't be messy. Barrons doesn't like to be messy. He's meticulous; a sophisticated, exquisite dresser. Although I've straightened his lapel a few times, it was only for the excuse of touching him. Stepping into his personal space. Exercising familiarity to underscore that I had the right. Unpredictable as a hungry lion, he might be feared by everyone else, but he never ripped out *my* throat, only licked me, and, if his tongue was a little rough sometimes, it was worth it to walk beside the king of the jungle.

My heart is going to explode.

I can't do this. I just went through this with my sister. Regret upon regret. Missed opportunities. Bad decisions. Grief.

How many more people will have to die before I learn how to live? He was right. I'm walking catastrophe.

I fumble in my pocket for my phone. First thing I do is dial Barrons' cell. The call doesn't go through. I press IYCGM. Call doesn't go through. I hit IYD and hold my breath, watching Barrons intently. The call doesn't go through.

Like the man himself, all lines are down.

I begin to shake. I don't know why, but the fact that the cell phones don't work convinces me more than anything else that he's beyond my reach.

I flip my head down, scrape my hair forward, and, although it takes me a few tries to get the angle right, I take a shot of my nape. Sure enough, two tattoos. Barrons' brand is a dragon with a Z in the center that shimmers with faint iridescence.

To the left of his tattoo is a black circle crammed with strange symbols I don't recognize. It seems Ryodan was telling the truth. If the tattoo was put there by the LM, it explains a lot. Why Barrons so heavily warded the basement where he dragged me back from being *Pri-y*. How the LM found me at the abbey once the wards had been painted over, how he found me again at the house Dani and I squatted in, and how he'd tracked me to my parents' house in Ashford.

I pull out the small dirk I lifted from BB&B.

My hand trembles.

I could end my pain. I could curl up and bleed out next to him. It'd be over so quickly. Maybe I'd get another chance some other time, some other place. Maybe he and I would be reincarnated like in that movie, *What Dreams May Come*, that Alina and I hated so much.

because the kids and husband died, then the wife committed suicide.

I love that movie now. I get it, the whole idea of willingly going to hell for someone. Living there, insane if you have to, because you'd rather be insane with them than endure life without them.

I stare at the blade.

He died so I would live.

“Damn you! I don’t *want* to live without you!”

*It’s how you go on that defines you.*

“Oh, shut up, would you? You’re dead, shut up, shut up!”

But a terrible truth is shredding my heart.

I’m the girl that cried “wolf.”

I’m the one that pressed IYD. I’m the one that didn’t think I could survive the boar on my own. And guess what?

*I did.*

I’d driven it away and already been safe by the time Barrons appeared and blasted into it.

I hadn’t really been dying after all.

He died for me and it hadn’t been necessary.

*I overreacted.*

And now he’s dead.

I stare at the dirk. Killing myself would be a reward. I deserve only punishment.

I stare at the snapshot of the back of my head. If the Lord Master found me right now, I’m not sure I would fight for my life.

I consider attempting surgery on my own skull, then realize I am not in the best frame of mind for that. I might not stop cutting. It’s close to my spinal column. Easy way out.

I slam the blade into the dirt before I can turn it on myself.

What would that make of me? That I got him killed, then killed myself? A coward. But it’s not what it would make of me that bothers me. It’s what it would make of him—a wasted death.

The death of a man like him deserves more than that.

I bite back another scream. It’s trapped inside me now, stuffed down into my belly, burning the back of my throat, making it painful to swallow. I hear it in my ears even though my mouth makes no sound. It’s a silent scream. The worst kind. I lived with this once before to keep Mom and Dad from knowing that Alina’s death was killing me, too. I know what comes next, and I know it’s going to be worse than last time. That *I’m* going to be worse.

Much, much worse.

I remember the scenes of slaughter Barrons showed me in his mind. I understand them now. Understand what might drive a person to it.

I kneel beside his naked, bloody body. The transformation from man to beast must have shredded his clothing, exploded the silver cuff from his wrist. Nearly two thirds of his body inked with black and crimson protection runes.

“Jericho,” I say. “Jericho, Jericho, Jericho.” Why did I ever begrudge him his name? “Barrons” was a stone wall I erected between us, and if a hairline fracture appeared, I hastily mortared it with fear.

I close my eyes and steel myself. When I open them, I wrap both hands around the spee

and try to pull it from his back. It doesn't come out. It's lodged in bone. I have to fight for it.

I stop. I start again. I weep.

He doesn't move.

I can do this. I can.

I work the spear free.

After a long moment, I roll him over.

If there was any doubt in my mind that he was dead, it vanishes. His eyes are open. The  
are empty.

Jericho Barrons is no longer there.

I open my senses to the world around me. I can't feel him at all.

I am on this cliff, alone.

I've never been so alone.

I try everything I can think of to bring him back to life.

I remember the Unseelie flesh we crammed into my backpack what seems a lifetime ago  
back in the bookstore when I was getting ready to face the Lord Master. Most of it is still  
there.

If only I'd known then what I know now! That the next time I saw Jericho Barrons, he'd be  
dead. That the last words I would ever hear him say were "And the Lamborghini," with that  
wolf smile and promise that he would always be at my back, breathing down it, keeping me  
covered.

The wriggling, chopped-up Rhino-boy flesh is still neatly trapped in baby-food jars. I force  
it between his swollen, bloodied lips and hold his mouth shut. When it crawls out the jagged  
gash in his neck, my trapped scream nearly deafens me.

I'm not thinking clearly. Panic and grief ride me. Barrons would say: *Useless emotions, M  
Lane. Rise above them. Stop reacting and act.* There he is, talking to me again.

What wouldn't I do for him? Nothing is too disgusting, too barbaric. This is Barrons. I want  
him whole again.

Ryodan had flayed him from gut to chest, before he slit his throat. I carefully peel back the  
meat of his tattooed abdomen and stuff Unseelie into his exposed, sliced stomach. It crawls  
out. I consider trying to sew the stomach up, so his body would be forced to digest the flesh  
of the dark Fae, and wonder if it would work, but I lack needle, thread, or any other means  
of repairing his torn flesh.

I attempt to put his entrails back into his body, arrange them in some semblance of order,  
dimly aware that this is perhaps not a normal, sane thing to do.

Once he said: *Get inside me, see how deep you can go.* With my hands on his spleen, I think  
*Here I am. Too little, too late.*

I use my newfound proficiency in Voice and command him to rise. He told me once that  
student and teacher develop immunity to each other. I'm almost relieved. I was afraid Voice  
might raise a zombie, reanimated but not truly revived.

I prop his mouth open with a stick, slit my wrist, and drip blood into it. I have to slice deep  
to get a few drops and keep slicing because I keep healing. It only makes him bloodier.

I search my *sidhe*-seer place for magic to heal him. I have nothing of such consequence  
inside me.

I am suddenly furious.

How could he be mortal? How *dare* he be mortal? He never told me he was mortal! If I had known, I might have treated him differently!

“Get up, get up, get up!” I shout.

His eyes are still open. I hate that they’re open and so empty and blank, but closing them would be an admission, an acceptance I don’t have in me.

I will never close Jericho Barrons’ eyes.

They were wide open in life. He would want them open in death. Rituals would be wasted on him. Wherever Barrons is, he would laugh if I tried something as mundane as a funeral. Too small for such a large man.

Put him in a box? Never.

Bury him? No way.

Burn him?

That, too, would be acceptance. Admission that he was dead. Never going to happen.

Even in death he looks indomitable, his big black-and-crimson-tattooed body an epic giant felled in battle.

I settle on the ground, gently lift his head, maneuver my legs beneath it, and cradle his face in my arms. With my shirt and hot tears that won’t stop falling, I bathe away dirt and blood and clean him tenderly.

Harsh, forbidding, beautiful face.

I touch it. Trace it with my fingers, over and over, until I know the subtlest nuances of every plane and angle, until I could carve it out of stone even if I were blind.

I kiss him.

I lie down and stretch out next to him. I press my body to his and hold on.

I hold him like I never permitted myself to hold him when he was alive. I tell him all the things I never said.

For a time, I have no idea where he ends and I begin.

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## The Dani Daily

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91 Days AWC

**GET YOUR SHADE-BUSTERS!!!**

**READ ALL ABOUT IT!!!**

Yep, you heard me right! The feckers CAN be killed! Brought to you by *The Dani Daily*, your ONLY source for all the news AWC (After the Wall Crash, morons. I ain’t gonna keep spelling things out for you).

**The Dani “Mega” O’Malley SHADE-BUSTER**

- 1 chunk Unseelie flesh.
- 
- Fuse.
  - Flash powder. Use only pyrotechnic industry-standard mix. Do NOT use chlorate or sulfur. HIGHLY unstable. Take it from me, I know what I'm talkin' about!

Make cherry bomb. Pack in center of flesh. Run fuse. Mold Unseelie flesh into round shape for easier rolling. Corner Shade, roll in SHADE-BUSTER, and cover your ears! The feckers are cannibals!!! Watch Shade devour snack and disintegrate when the bomb explodes inside it. If it eats LIGHT, it dies!

### **CAVEATS!**

\*Kids under 14: Do NOT do this without help. Ain't gonna do nobody no good if you blow your hands off. We need you in this fight. Be cool. Smart is the new cool.

\*You gotta be fast! If you find a 'specially bad nest, write down the address of it on *The Dani Daily*, stick it on the wall inside the G.P.O., O'Connell Street, Dublin 1, and I'll take care of it for you. (They don't call me MEGA for nothing!)

\*Do NOT use SULFUR! It makes the mix WAY unstable. I'm still growing back my eyebrows and nose hair.

\*Times the cherry bomb blows before the Shade eats it. Some of 'em are stupid enough to eat the next one you throw in.

### **LEGAL DISCLAIMER!**

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It's funny the things people say when someone dies.

*He's in a better place.*

How do you know that?

*Life goes on.*

That's supposed to comfort me? I'm excruciatingly aware that life goes on. It hurts every damned second. How lovely to know it's going to continue like this. Thank you for reminding me.

*Time heals.*

No, it doesn't. At best, time is the great leveler, sweeping us all into coffins. We find ways to distract ourselves from the pain. Time is neither scalpel nor bandage. It is indifferent. Scar tissue isn't a good thing. It's merely the wound's other face.

I live with the specter of Alina every day. Now I will live with Barrons' ghost, too. War between them: one on my right, one on my left. They will talk to me incessantly. I'll never escape, bridged between my greatest failures.

The day is cooling by the time I'm able to force myself to move. I know what that means. It means night is about to come slamming down on me with the finality of steel shutters on the glass façade of an upscale shop in a rundown neighborhood. I try to disentangle myself from him. I don't want to. It takes half a dozen attempts to make myself sit up. My head aches from crying; my throat burns from screaming. When I sit up, only the shell of my body moves. My heart is still lying on the ground next to Jericho Barrons. It beats one more time then stops.

Peace at last.

I cross my legs beneath me and stiffly push myself up. I stand like I'm a hundred years old, creaking in every bone.

If the Lord Master is hunting me, I've sat on this cliff's edge for a dangerously long time.

*The Lord Master, Darroc, leader of the dark Fae, bastard that tore down the walls on Halloween and turned the Unseelie hordes loose on my world.*

The son of a bitch that started it all: seduced and either killed Alina or got her killed; had me raped by the Unseelie Princes, lobotomized, and turned into a helpless slave; abducted my parents and forced me into the Silvers; and drove me to this cliff's edge, where I murdered Barrons.

If not for one ex-Fae hell-bent on regaining his lost grace and exacting retribution, *none* of this would have happened.

Revenge will never be enough. Revenge would be over too quickly. It wouldn't satisfy the complexity of the needs of the creature I became while I was lying here, holding him.

I want it all back.

Everything that was taken from me.

A geyser of rage explodes in me, seeping into all the nooks and crannies my grief occupied.

I welcome it, encourage it, genuflect to my new god. I baptize myself in its steaming, hissing fury. I give myself over. *Claim me, take me, own me, I am yours.*

*Sidhe-seer* is only a few letters away from *Ban-sidhe*: my birth country's harbinger of death, that shrieking mythic creature driven by fury.

I seek that dark glassy lake in my mind. I stand on the black-pebbled beach. Runes float on the shiny ebon surface, glistening with power.

I bend, trail my fingers through the black water, scoop up two fistfuls, and offer them to the bottomless loch a deep bow of gratitude.

It's my friend. I know that now. It has always been.

My fury is too vast for nooks and crannies.

I don't try to contain it. I let it build into a dark, dangerous melody. I throw my head back, making room for it as it rises. It swells, blasts up my throat, puffs out my cheeks. When it erupts from my lips, it's an inhuman cry that soars above the trees, rips into the air, and shatters the tranquillity of the forest.

Wolves startle awake in their dens, howling in mournful chorus; boars squeal; and creatures I cannot name scream. Our concert is deafening.

The temperature drops and the forest around me is abruptly encased in a thick silver coating of ice, from smallest blade of grass to highest bough.

Birds flash-freeze and die, beaks parted, feeding their babies.

Squirrels ice, mid-leap, and drop like stones to the ground, where they shatter.

I glance at my hands. They are stained black, my palms cup silvery runes.

I know now where Barrons ends and I begin.

When Barrons ended, *I* began.

Me.

Mac O'Connor.

*Sidhe-seer* that a certain Seelie Prince said the world *should* fear.

I kneel and kiss Barrons a final time.

I do not cover him or perform any ritual. It would be for me, not him. There is only one thing left that I will do for me.

Soon, none of this will matter anyway.

I had to be ripped in half to stop feeling so torn in two. Divided, never knowing who to trust.

I'm now a woman with a single ambition.

I know exactly what I'm going to do.

And I know how I'm going to do it.

After leaving Barrons' body, I travel in the direction my guardian demon had been herding me. I believe he must have wanted me to go this way for a reason.

I trust him in death like I never did in life.

What a piece of work I am.

I follow the river for miles. As he disappears behind me, so, too, do I. With each step I take, I strip off another piece of myself. The weak parts. The parts that won't help me accomplish my goals. And if they are the so-called human parts, oh, well. I can't feel and still survive what I've got to get through.

When I am certain I am ready, I stop and wait for my enemy.

He does not disappoint.

"I thought you'd never get here," I say, my voice husky from screaming. It hurts to talk. I savor the pain. It's what I deserve.

The LM is still some distance away, concealed in the forest, but I see the shadows that move too sinuously to be cast by any tree.

"Come out." I lean back against a tree, one hand in a pocket at my cocked hip, the other at my waist. "I *am* what you want, aren't I? What you came here for. What all this is about. Why hesitate now?"

My spear is in the holster beneath my arm, my dirk in my waistband. The black-leather pouch holding the three stones the LM wants—three-quarters of what we all hope will form some kind of cage for the *Sinsar Dubh*—are tucked securely in my backpack, which hangs over my shoulder.

Shapes glide from the darkness: the LM and the last two Unseelie Princes.

Jack and Rainey Lane are not with them.

That would disturb me, except the Mac who loves her parents was in those pieces I left behind with Barrons' body. Barrons is dead. It's my fault. I have no parents. No love. No weaknesses. There's not a single shaft of sunshine in my soul.

I feel immeasurably lighter, stronger.

Darroc—I will no longer call him the LM; even the abbreviation of his smug-ass title implies superiority—has been eating a great deal of Unseelie flesh. Power is thick in the air between us. I'm not sure what comes from him and what is rolling off me. I wonder how his minions feel about him cannibalizing their own. Perhaps what is an abomination to the Light Court is a common vice at the Dark Court, an acceptable hazard of being Unseelie.

As he approaches the circle of silvery light in which I stand, his eyes widen infinitesimally.

I laugh, a throaty purr. I know what I look like. I washed after leaving Barrons and prepared myself with care. My bra is in my backpack. My hair is softly curled and winds around my face. It took time to get the black stain off my palms. There is nothing about me that is not a weapon, an asset, something to use to get what I want, including my body. I've learned a thing or two from Barrons: Power is sexy. It shapes my spine, infuses my beckoning

hand.

I have not been devastated by Barrons' death. The alchemy of grief has forged a new meta

I have been *transformed*.

There's only one way I can make his death okay. Undo it.

And, while I'm at it, undo Alina's, too.

Every person I've met who's known something about the *Sinsar Dubh* was cryptic about it

No one has been willing to tell me exactly what's in it. The only thing everyone kept telling me was that it was imperative I find it, and quickly, because it could be used to keep the walls from crashing.

Well, the walls are down now. It's too late.

Considering that I've been hunting this Book with single-minded dedication for months, it's startling how little thought I've given to its contents. I swallowed what I was told and obediently chased it.

I suspect now that everyone was keeping me tightly focused on the goal of finding it in order to keep the walls up, so I'd never get around to thinking too hard about *other* possible uses for the *Sinsar Dubh*.

There I was, hunting an object of unspeakable power, surrounded by people that wanted it for reasons of their own, and never once did I think: Wait a minute—what might it do for me?

Darroc told me that with the *Sinsar Dubh* he could bring Alina back. He said he wanted it to reclaim his Fae essence and exact revenge.

V'lane told me that the Dark Book holds all the Unseelie King's knowledge, every last damnable bit of it. He said he wants it for the Seelie Queen, so she might use it to restore their race to their former glory and to re-imprison the Unseelie. He believes it contains fragments of the Song of Making, lost to their race so long ago, and that the queen will be able to use them to re-create the ancient melody. I don't know exactly what the Song of Making is or does, but it seems to be the ultimate in Fae power.

It was Barrons that told me the most. He said the *Sinsar Dubh* contained spells to make and unmake worlds. Something to do with those fragments of the Song. He never would tell me why he wanted it. Said he was a book collector. Right. And I'm the Unseelie King.

Lying there, holding Barrons' body, I'd contemplated the *Sinsar Dubh's* potential uses, for the first time, in a very personal way.

Especially the part about making and unmaking worlds.

It had all become perfectly clear to me.

With the *Sinsar Dubh*, a person could create a world with a different past—and a different future.

Essentially, a person could turn back time.

Erase anything they didn't like.

Replace those things they couldn't bear to have lost, including people they couldn't stand to live without.

I'd torn myself away from Barrons' body with one purpose.

To get the *Sinsar Dubh*, and when I did, I wasn't turning it over to anyone. It was going to be *mine*. I would study it. Grief had focused me like a laser. I could learn anything. Nothing would stand in my way. I would rebuild the world the way I wanted it.

“Come.” I smile. “Join me.” My face radiates only warmth, invitation, pleasure at his presence. I am the last thing he expected. He believed he would find a terrorized, hysterical girl.

I’m not and never will be again.

He motions the princes back and takes a casual step forward, but I see the studied grace in the movement. He is wary of me. He should be.

Coppery Fae eyes meet mine. How did Alina fail to see that those eyes were not human, no matter how human his body appeared?

The answer is simple: She did. She knew. That was why she lied to him, told him that she didn’t have any family, that she was an orphan. Protected us from the very first. She knew there was something dangerous about him, and she wanted him anyway, wanted to taste that kind of life.

I don’t blame her. We are flawed. We *should* have been banned from Ireland for everyone’s good.

He assesses me. I know he passed Barrons’ body. He’s trying to figure out what happened but is unwilling to ask. I suspect nothing could have convinced him more surely than seeing Barrons dead that the MacKayla he thought he was dealing with wasn’t home anymore. His gaze drops to the thin, jagged-edged silvery runes on the ground encircling me, bathing me in a cool, eerie light. His eyes widen again as he scans them, and, for the briefest of instants, he looks rattled.

“Nice work.” His gaze flicks between the runes and my face. “What are they?”

“You don’t recognize them?” I counter. I sense deception. He knows what they are. I don’t. I’d like to.

The next thing I know, his copper eyes lock with mine and a vibrant blue-black light blazes from his fist. I hadn’t even seen him reach inside his shirt for the Hallow.

“Step out of the circle now,” he commands.

He’s not using Voice. He’s holding the amulet, one of the four Unseelie Hallows, an ornate necklace that houses a fist-sized stone of inexplicable composition. The king created it for his concubine to enable her to bend reality to her whim. The amulet reinforces an epic person’s will. Months ago, I sat at a very exclusive auction in an underground bomb shelter and watched an old Welshman pay in excess of eight figures for it. He’d had stiff competition. Mallucé had murdered the old man and taken it before Barrons and I had been able to steal it. But the wannabe vamp couldn’t use it.

Darroc can. I believe I could, too—if I can get it from him.

I held it once, and it responded to me. But, like many things Fae, time imbued it with a degree of sentience and it had sought something from me—a binding, or pledge. I’d never understood—or, if I had, hadn’t been willing to make it, afraid of what it would cost me. I lost the Hallow to Darroc when he’d Voiced me into turning it over, before I learned to use Voice myself. I’d have no compunction about exploring the amulet’s desires now. No price too high.

I feel the blue-black power it radiates, lacing his command with compulsion. The pressure is immense. I want to leave the circle. I could breathe, eat, sleep, live without pain forever, only I would leave the circle.

I laugh. “*Throw me the amulet now.*” Voice explodes from me.

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