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KAREN MARIE
MONING

FEVERBORN

❖ A FEVER NOVEL ❖

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Feverborn is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the productions of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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By Karen Marie Moning

About the Author

Dear Reader,

If this is the first book you've picked up in the Fever Series, at the end of *Feverborn* I've included a guide of People, Places, and Things to illuminate the backstory.

If you're a seasoned reader of the series, the guide will reacquaint you with notable events and characters, what they did, if they survived, and if not, how they died.

You can either read the guide first, getting acquainted with the world, or reference it as you go along to refresh your memory. The guide features characters by type, followed by places, then things.

To the new reader, welcome to the Fever World.

To the devoted readers who make it possible for me to continue living, dreaming, and writing in this sexy, dangerous world, welcome back and thank you!

Karen

Part I

Appearances to the mind are of four kinds. Things either are what they appear to be; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be. Rightly to aim in all these cases is the wise man's task.

—Epictetus

...then She Who Came First gave the Song to the darkness and the Song rushed into the abysses and filled every void with life. Galaxies and beings sprang into existence, suns and moons and stars were born.

But She Who Came First was no more eternal than the suns, moons, and stars, so she gave the Song to the first female of the True Race to use only in times of great need, to be used with great care for there are checks and balances, and a price for imperfect Song. She cautioned her Chosen never to lose the melody for it would have to be gathered from all the far corners of all the galaxies again.

Of course it was lost. In time enough, everything is lost.

—The Book of Rain

PROLOGUE

Dublin, Ireland

The night was wild, electric, stormy. Unwritten.
As was he.

An unexpected episode in what had been a tightly scripted film.

Coat billowing like dark wings behind him, he walked across the rain-slicked roof of the water tower, dropped to a crouch on the edge, rested his forearms on his knees, and stared out over the city.

Lightning flashed gold and scarlet, briefly gilding dark rooftops and wet-silver streets below. Amber gas lamps glowed, pale lights flickered in windows, and Faery magic danced on the air. Fog steamed from cobblestones, mincing through alleys and shrouding buildings.

There was no place he'd rather be than this ancient, luminous city, where modern man rubbed his shoulders with pagan gods. In the past year, Dublin had transformed from an everyday urban dwelling with a touch of magic to a chillingly magical city with a touch of normal. It had metamorphosed from a thriving metropolis bustling with people, to a silent iced shell, to its current incarnation: savage and alive as those who remained struggled to seize control. Dublin was a minefield, the balance of power shifting constantly as key players were eliminated without warning. Nothing was easy. Every move, each decision, a matter of life and death. It made for interesting times. Small human lives were so limited. And for that very reason, so fascinating. Shadowed by death, life became immediate. Intense.

He knew the past. He'd seen glimpses of many futures. Like its unpredictable inhabitants, Dublin had fallen off the grid of expected trajectories. Recent events in the area had not transpired in any future he'd seen. There was no telling what might happen next. The possibilities were infinite.

He liked it that way.

Fate was a misnomer; an illusion erected and clung to by people who needed to believe when things spun out of their control there was some grand purpose for their fucked-up existence, some mysterious redemptive design that made it worth the suffering.

Ah, the painful truth: Fate was a cosmic toilet. It was the nature of the universe to flush sluggish things that failed to exercise free will. Stasis was stagnancy. Change was velocity. Fate—a sniper who preferred a motionless target to a dancing one.

He wanted to graffiti the side of every building in the city: IT ISN'T FATE. IT'S YOUR OWN STUPID FUCKING FAULT. But he knew better. Admitting there was no such thing as Fate meant acknowledging personal responsibility. He wasn't about to ante up on that hand.

Still...every now and then one came along like him, like this city that defied all expectation, own every action, flipped Fate the bird at each opportunity. One that didn't merely exist.

But lived. Fearless. No price too high for freedom. He understood that.

With a faint smile, he surveyed the city below.

From the tower he could see all the way to the choppy whitecapped sea, its black and silver surface shadowed by the hulking shapes of abandoned ships and barges, and sleeker vessels bobbing on the storm-tossed waves, white sails snapping in the chilly gale.

To his left rooftops stretched, another shadowy rain-pelted sea, sheltering what humans had survived the fall of the ancient walls that had kept the Fae hidden for millennia.

To the right, tucked down a quiet cobblestone street of pubs and upscale shops—easy to identify by the floodlights blazing on the rooftop and the vast section of forsaken city beyond it decimated by the bottomless appetites of the Shades—was that peculiar spatially challenged place known as Barrons Books & Baubles, which was so much more than it appeared to be.

Somewhere down there where gutters routed streams of water to a vast underground drainage system riddled by long forgotten catacombs, Fae walked the streets both openly and hidden, and neon signs cast fractured rainbows on the pavement, was the prior owner of that bookstore, if such a place was ever owned; his Machiavellian ruthless brother; and an invisible woman who, like the building which she now laid claim, was far more than she appeared to be.

Farther to the left down winding rural roads, if one traveled a solid hour of stark desolation through a second hour of Faery-lush vegetation, was another of those ancient places that could never be owned and the brilliant, powerful woman determined to command it.

Barrons, Ryodan, Mac, Jada.

The possibilities were enormous, dazzling, and he had a fair idea how things would go...but the moments were unpredictable, unscripted.

He threw back his dark head and laughed.

As was he.

“It’s the end of the world as we know it...”

I grew up believing in rules, thanks to my parents, Jack and Rainey Lane. I didn’t always like the rules and I broke them when they didn’t work for me, but they were sturdy things I could rely on to shape the way I lived and keep me—if not totally on the straight and narrow, at least aware there was a straight and narrow I could return to if I got to feeling lost.

Rules serve a purpose. I once told Rowena they were fences for sheep, but fences do more than merely keep sheep in a pasture where shepherds can guide them. They provide protection in the vast and frightening unknown. The night isn’t half as scary when you’re in the center of a fluffy-butted herd, bumping rumps with other fluffy butts, not able to see too much, feeling secure and mostly normal.

Without fences of any kind, the dark night beyond is clearly visible. You stand alone in it. Without rules, you have to decide what you want and what you’re willing to do to get it. You must embrace the weapons with which you choose to arm yourself to survive.

What we achieve at our best moment doesn’t say much about who we are.

It all boils down to what we become at our worst moment.

What you find yourself capable of if...say...

You get stranded in the middle of the ocean with a lone piece of driftwood that will support one person’s weight and not a single ounce more—while floating beside a nice person that needs it as badly as you do.

That’s the moment that defines you.

Will you relinquish your only hope of survival to save the stranger? Will it matter if the stranger is old and has lived a full life or young and not yet had the chance?

Will you try to make the driftwood support both of you, ensuring both your deaths?

Or will you battle savagely for the coveted float with full cognizance the argument could be made—even if you merely take the driftwood away without hurting the stranger and swim off—that you’re committing murder?

Is it murder in your book?

Would you cold-bloodedly kill for it?

How do you feel as you swim away? Do you look back? Do tears sting your eyes? Or do you feel like a motherfucking winner?

Impending death has a funny way of popping the shiny, happy bubble of who we think we are. A lot

of things do.

I live in a world with few fences. Lately, even those are damned rickety.

I resented that. There was no straight and narrow anymore. Only a circuitous route that required constant remapping to dodge IFPs, black holes, and monsters of every kind, along with the messy ethical potholes that mine the interstates of a postapocalyptic world.

I stared at the two-way glass of Ryodan's office, currently set to privacy—floor transparent, walls and ceiling opaque—and got briefly distracted by the reflection of the glossy black desk behind me reflected in the darkened glass, reflected in the desk, reflected in the glass, receding into ever-smaller tableaux, creating a disconcerting infinity-mirror effect.

Although I stood squarely between the desk and the wall, I was invisible to the world, to myself. The *Sinsar Dubh* was still disconcertingly silent, and for whatever reason, still cloaking me.

I cocked my head, studying the spot where I should be.

Nothing looked back. It was bizarrely fitting.

That was me: tabula rasa—the blank slate. I knew somewhere I had a pen but I seemed to have forgotten how to use it. Or maybe I'd just wised up enough to know what I held these days was not an Easy-Erase marker of my youth, scrubbed off by the gentle swipe of a moistened cloth, but a big, fat, black-tipped Sharpie: black and bold and permanent.

Dani, stop running. I just want to talk to you...

Dani was gone. There was only Jada now. I couldn't unwrite our fight. I couldn't unwrite the choice Barrons and I moved those mirrors. I couldn't unwrite the choice of mirrors Dani made that took her to the one place too dangerous to follow. I couldn't change the terrible abusive childhood that fractured her, with which she dealt brilliantly and creatively in order to survive. Of them all, that was what I really wished I could erase.

I felt immobilized by the many ways I could screw things up, acutely aware of the butterfly effect that the tiniest, most innocuous action could trigger unthinkable catastrophe, painfully evidenced by the result of my trying to confront Dani. Five and a half years of her life were gone, leaving a dispassionate killer where the exuberant, funny, emotional, and spectacularly uncontrollable Mega had once stood.

Lately I'd taken some comfort in the thought that although Jericho Barrons and his men were waging the hell out there on the fringes of humanity, they'd figured out a code to live by that benefited them while doing modest damage to our world. Like me, they had their inner beasts but had spawned a set of rules that kept their savage nature in check.

Mostly.

I'd settle for mostly.

I'd been telling myself I, too, could choose a code and stick to it, using them as my role models. I snorted, morbidly amused. The role models I had a year ago and the ones I had now were certainly polar opposites.

I glanced up at the monitor that revealed the half-darkened stone chamber where, on the edge of the darkness, Barrons and Ryodan sat watching a figure in the shadows.

I held my breath waiting for the figure to once again lumber forward into the pallid light streaking the gloom. I wanted a second thorough look to confirm if what I suspected at first glance was true.

When it shuddered and stumbled to its feet, arms swinging wildly as if fighting off unseen

attackers, Barrons and Ryodan uncoiled and assumed fighting posture.

The figure exploded from the shadows and lunged for Ryodan's throat with enormous taloned hands. It was rippling, changing, fighting to hold form and failing, morphing before my eyes. In the low light cheetah-gold irises turned crimson then blood-smeared gold then crimson again. Long black hair fell back from a smooth forehead that abruptly rippled and sprouted a prehensile crest. Black fangs gleamed in the low light, then were white teeth, then fangs again.

I'd seen this morphing enough times to know what it was.

The Nine could no longer be called that.

There were ten of them now.

Barrons blocked the Highlander before he reached Ryodan, and suddenly all three were blurs as they moved in a manner similar to Dani's freeze-framing ability, only faster.

Make me like you, I'd said to Barrons recently. Though in all honesty I doubt I'd have gone through with it. At least not at the moment, in the state I was in, inhabited by a thing that terrified me.

Never ask me that, he'd growled. His terse reply had spoken volumes, confirming he could if he wanted to. And I'd known in that wordless way he and I understand each other that not only did he loathe the idea, it was one of their unbreakable rules. Once, he'd found me lying in a subterranean grotto on the verge of death, and I suspect he'd considered the idea. Perhaps a second time when his son had ripped out my throat. And been grateful he'd not had to make the choice.

Ryodan however *did* make that choice. And not for a woman, fueled by the single-minded passion that drove the Unseelie king to birth his dark court, but for reasons unfathomable to me. For the Highlander he barely knew. The owner of Chester's was once again an enigma. Why would he do such a thing? Dageus had died or at the very least was dying, lanced by the Crimson Hag, battered and broken by a horrific fall into the gorge.

People die.

Ryodan never gives a bloody damn.

Barrons was furious. I didn't need sound—although I sure would have liked it—to know down that stone chamber something primal was rattling in Barrons's chest. Nostrils flared, eyes narrowed, his teeth flashed on a snarl as he spat words I couldn't hear and they attempted to subdue the Highlander without using killing force. Which I suspected was more a damage-control technique than a kindness, because if Dageus died he would come back at the same place they do when reborn. Then they'd have to go wherever that was to retrieve him, which would not only be a pain in the ass but make a tenth person who knew where the forbidden spot was—a thing not even I knew.

I frowned. Then again maybe I was making assumptions that didn't hold water. Maybe they came back wherever *individually* they died, which would put Dageus somewhere in a German mountain range.

Whatever.

Like Barrons, I was pissed.

If Ryodan broke rules with impunity, how was I supposed to figure out where to draw my own lines? What were lines really worth if you just crossed them whenever you felt like it?

My role models sucked.

I circled the desk and perched on Ryodan's chair, staring up at the LED screens lining the perimeter on the opposite wall, wishing I could read lips.

Dageus convulsed and collapsed to the floor. He shuddered and jerked as his beast tried to claw its way from inside his skin in a vicious battle for control of the vessel they shared. It wasn't lost on me that Dani and I waged a similar war—she against Jada, I against a Book. I wondered if that was just what happened to people who served on the front line of the world's battles, who as Dani would say lived large: they got taken by some kind of a demon eventually. I'd seen my share of Veterans back home in Georgia that had that look in their eyes, the one I saw in my own lately. Was it inevitable for people who walked too long in the dark night beyond fences? Maybe that was the price for not staying with the sheep. Maybe that was why the stupid sheep stayed.

Maybe they weren't so stupid after all.

Then again, what happened to me occurred before I'd even been born. It wasn't as if I'd had any say in the matter. Psychopaths were born every day, too. Perhaps inner demons were nothing more than the luck of the draw. I also drew Barrons, the best wild card a woman could hold in her hand. Inasmuch as that man could be held.

After what seemed an interminable spell of painful morphing, Dageus crawled back to the shadows, dragged himself up onto a stone ledge and lay there shaking violently.

I wondered what he was in for. Were the Nine like vampires, consumed by mindless bloodlust when first transformed into whatever the hell they were? I wondered if he was even capable of thought or if his body was undergoing such traumatic changes that he was a blank slate like me. I wondered how they planned to explain this to the other MacKeltar, to Dageus's wife. Then I realized they obviously didn't intend to since they sent the Highland clan home with what must have been someone else's body to bury.

What a mess. I didn't see any way this situation could turn out good. Well, except maybe for Chloe if she was eventually reunited with her husband. I had no problem with Barrons's inner beast. In fact the more I saw of it, the more I liked it. More than the man at this moment, because he hadn't come back to me first but at least now I understood why.

The door to the office whisked open and Lor stood framed in the entry. I glanced down to make sure the chair I was sitting in was actually visible and swallowed a sigh of relief. Apparently it was substantial enough that my sitting in it didn't make it vanish. I eased out of it carefully, so slowly it made the muscles in my legs burn, as I tried to keep it from squeaking or shifting even slightly and betraying my presence. I inched around the side and backed against a wall.

Belatedly I realized the two previously hidden panels on Ryodan's desk were now in plain view and the monitors that had been showing public parts of the club were showing things I wasn't sure Lor knew. Private was too mild a word for Barrons and Ryodan. Stay-the-fuck-out-of-my-business was their shared surname. I had no idea if they'd told Lor I was currently invisible, but if they hadn't meant to keep it that way.

Lor glanced over his shoulder, up and down the hall, to ascertain whether he was unobserved, then stepped quickly into the office as the door whisked closed behind him.

I raised a brow, wondering what he was up to.

He walked straight for the desk but drew up short when he saw the hidden panel had slid out.

"What the fuck, boss?" he murmured.

He headed for the chair and drew up short again when he saw the panel behind the desk was also exposed. "Christ, you're getting sloppy. What the fuck sent you outta here so fast you couldn't close things up?"

His assumption worked for me.

Shaking his head, Lor dropped into Ryodan's chair and slid the hidden panel out farther than I knew it went, revealing two small remotes. I eased near, peering over his shoulder, then drew back sharply when he dropped the chair back into recline and kicked his boots up on the desk with a wolfish grin. He fiddled with the remote, seemingly unaware that the monitors he was preparing to watch were already on.

I inched forward again.

He hit Rewind for a few seconds, punched Play, then looked straight up at the monitor I'd watched him and Jo having sex on no more than ten minutes ago.

Was he kidding me? He'd come up here to watch the sex he just had with Jo? Freaking men!

I refused to watch it twice. Once had been bad enough. I closed my eyes, waiting for him to notice what was playing on the monitors next to the one he was watching. It didn't take long.

"What the bloody fuck?" he said in a near-whisper. I heard the sound of something breaking, bits of plastic hitting the floor.

Yep. He definitely didn't know.

"Fuck," he barked, staccato sharp.

After a moment, he growled, "Fuuuu-uuuck."

Then, "Aw, fuck, fuck, FUCK."

Lor seemed to have gotten stuck on the word he likes the most. No surprise there.

I opened my eyes. He was standing behind the desk, ramrod straight, legs spread, arms folded, muscles bulging, tense from head to toe. The remote was on the floor in pieces.

"Bloody fucking fuck, are you fucking crazy? Have you lost your motherfucking mind?"

I'd been wondering the same thing.

"We don't do this shit. That's rule the fuck number one in our motherfucking universe. Not even you can get away with it, boss!"

While I found it oddly reassuring to know there were repercussions, I found it equally disconcerting. The last thing our world needed on top of all its other problems was war breaking out among the Nine. Rather, now...the Ten.

"Sonofamotherfuckinggoddamnitch! JaysustittyfuckingChrist!"

That was Lor. Man of few words.

He seized the second remote, punched a button, and the office was filled with harsh groans of pain. The Highlander was curled in a tight ball on the stone ledge. I glanced at Barrons and Ryodan, now sitting in stony silence, watching the Highlander. Apparently they were done arguing. Figured once we had volume they were no longer speaking to each other.

My gaze lingered on Barrons, savage, elegant, despotic, and enormously self-contained. I recognized that shirt, open at the throat, cuffs rolled back. I knew the pants, too, so dark gray they were nearly black, and his black and silver boots. Last time I'd seen him, he'd been gutted on a frigging cliff again—me, Barrons, and cliffs are a proven recipe for disaster—and his clothes were bloody and torn, which meant at some point he'd stopped at his lair behind the bookstore for a change of clothing. Tonight, after I'd left? Or days ago, while I'd tossed and turned on the chesterfield in a fitful sleep? Had he walked through the store? How long had he been back? His senses were acute. I knew I was invisible. If he'd bothered walking through the store while I slept, he'd have seen me.

indent on the sofa. Had he looked for me at all?

“You fucking turned him,” Lor growled. “What the fuck is so special about him? And you killed me just for getting a little uninterrupted time in the sack and fucking Jo!” He snorted. “Aw, man, this is gonna go tribunal. You should have let him die. You know what the fuck happens!”

What was tribunal? I knew what the word meant but couldn't fathom who might serve as the Nine court of law. Did this mean they'd turned humans in the past? If so, what had the tribunal done with them? It wasn't as if they could be killed. At least not until recently. Now there was K'Vruck, the ancient icy black Hunter whose killing blow had laid Barrons's tortured son to rest. Would they locate him and try to get him to kill Dageus? Would they expect me to help coax the enormous dead Hunter near? Had Dageus been saved from one death only to die a more permanent soul-eclipsing one?

Barrons spoke and I shivered. I love that man's voice. Deep, with an untraceable accent, it's sexy as hell. When he speaks, all the fine muscles in my body shift into a lower, tighter, more aggressive gear. I want him all the time. Even when I'm mad at him. Perversely, maybe even more so then.

“You violated our code. You created an untenable liability,” Barrons growled.

Ryodan gave him a look but said nothing.

“His loyalties will always be first and foremost to his clan. Not us.”

“Debatable.”

“Our secrets. Now his. He'll talk.”

“Debatable.”

“He's a Keltar. They're *nice*. They champion the underdog. Fight for the common good. As if there is such a bloody thing.”

Ryodan smiled faintly. “Nice is no longer one of his shortcomings.”

“You know what the tribunal will do.”

“There will be no tribunal. We'll keep him hidden.”

“You can't hide him forever. He won't agree to stay hidden forever. He has a wife, a child.”

“He'll get past it.”

“He's a Highlander. Clan is everything. He won't ever get past it.”

“He'll get past it.”

Barrons mocked, “Repetition of erroneous facts—”

“Fuck you.”

“And because he won't get past it, you know what they'll do to him. What we've done to others.”

How many others? I wondered. What had they done?

“Yet you have Mac,” Ryodan said.

“I didn't turn Mac.”

“Only because you didn't have to. Someone else extended her life. Giving you the easy way out. Maybe our code is wrong.”

“There are reasons for our code.”

“That's a fucking joke, coming from you. You said yourself, ‘Things are different now. We evolve. So does our code.’ Either there are laws or there aren't. And if there are laws, like everything in the universe, they exist to be tested.”

“That’s what you’re after? Establishing new case precedence? Never going to happen. Not on the point. You want to turn Dani. Assuming she’s ever Dani again.”

“Nobody’s turning my fucking honey,” Lor muttered darkly.

“You took the Highlander, as your test case,” Barrons said.

Ryodan said nothing.

“Kas doesn’t speak. X is half mad on a good day, bugfuck crazy on a bad one. You’re tired of it. You want your family back. You want a full house, like the old days.”

Ryodan growled, “You’re so fucking shortsighted, you can’t see past the end of your own dick.”

“Hardly short.”

“You don’t see what’s coming.”

Barrons inclined his head, waiting.

“Have you considered what will happen if we don’t find a way to stop the holes the Hoar Frost King made from growing.”

“Chester’s gets swallowed. Parts of the world disappear.”

“Or all.”

“We’ll stop it.”

“If we can’t.”

“We move on.”

“The kid,” Ryodan said with such contempt that I knew he was talking about Dancer, not Dani. “says they’re virtually identical to black holes. At worst, consuming all objects within to oblivion. At best, from which there is no escape. When we die,” he carefully enunciated each word, “we come back on this world. If this world doesn’t exist, or is inside a black hole…” He didn’t bother finishing. He didn’t need to.

Lor stared at the monitor. “Shit, boss.”

“I’m the one who’s always planning,” Ryodan said. “Doing whatever’s necessary to protect us and ensure our continued existence while you fucks live like tomorrow will always come.”

“Ah,” Barrons mocked, “the king wearies of the crown.”

“Never the crown. Only the subjects.”

“What does this have to do with the Highlander?” Barrons said impatiently.

Exactly what I was wondering.

“He’s a sixteenth-century druid that was possessed by the first thirteen druids trained by the Fae—the Draghar.”

“I heard he was cured of that little problem,” Barrons said.

“I heard otherwise from a certain walking lie detector who told Mac his uncle never managed to exorcise them completely.”

I scowled, pressing my fingers to my forehead, rubbing it as if to agitate my memory and recall exactly where I’d been when Christian told me that—and if there had been any damned roaches around. That was the problem with roaches: they were small and could wedge themselves in virtually any crack to eavesdrop unseen.

“You know what Christian told Mac when you weren’t present?” Barrons said softly.

Ryodan said nothing.

“If I ever see roaches in my bookstore...” Barrons didn’t bother finishing the threat.

“Roaches?” Lor muttered. “What the fuck’s he talking about?”

“The Seelie queen is missing,” Ryodan said. “The Unseelie don’t give a shit if this world destroyed. They aren’t bound to this planet like we are. Fae magic is destroying the world. It may be the only thing that saves it. The Highlander wasn’t supposed to die on that mountain. It wasn’t part of my plan. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want my fucking vagina to be inside a black hole.”

That was certainly a visual.

“Me neither,” Lor muttered. “I like my vaginas pink and smaller. *Much* smaller,” he added. “Likewise, I like my pussy way the fuck tight.”

I rolled my eyes.

Ryodan said, “This could be the end of us.”

The end of the Nine? I’d always kept in the back of my mind that if things got really bad on this world, I’d just grab everyone I love, along with everyone else we could round up, and travel through the Silvers to another planet. Colonize, start fresh. Unfortunately, erroneously, I’d only been thinking about that if things on this world got “really bad,” assuming there would still be a dangerous planet the Nine would certainly be able to battle their way off of again. I’d never considered that there might be a time when this planet didn’t even exist. I knew the black holes were a serious problem but I hadn’t fully absorbed what the small tears in the fabric of our universe really signified and what they might do long term. I’d overlooked the ramifications of the Nine being reborn on Earth.

And if Earth was no longer...

“We’ve got to fix those fucking holes,” Lor growled.

I nodded vehement agreement.

“Your plan?” Barrons said.

“We conceal his existence,” Ryodan said. “We push him through the change. Get the best minds on the planet to solve the problem and fix it. Once it’s resolved, the tribunal can do whatever the bloody hell they want. Likewise, I’ll give me a fucking medal and the free rein I deserve.”

“Jada,” Barrons said.

“And the kid because he gets physics, which, while no longer accurate, may help us understand what we’re dealing with. Mac. She’s got the bloody Book. Between her and the Highlander, we may just have more Fae lore than the Fae.”

But I can’t read it, I wanted to protest. What the hell good was it?

I shivered again, this time with a much deeper chill. I knew something with sudden, absolute certainty.

They were going to want me to.

“Fuck.” Lor was back to his one-word assessment of life, the universe, and everything.

Fuck, I agreed silently.

“Seasons don’t fear the Reaper...”

Inverness, Scotland, high above Loch Ness.

Christian had once believed he’d never set foot there again except in half-mad dreams. Tonight was madness of another kind.

Tonight, beneath a slate and crimson sky, he would bury the man who’d died to save him.

The entire Keltar clan was gathered in the sprawling cemetery behind the ruined tower, near the tomb of the Green Lady, to return the remains of Dageus MacKeltar to the earth in a sacred druidic ritual so his soul would be released to live again. Reincarnation was the foundation of their faith.

The air was heavy and humid from a nearby storm. A few miles to the west, lightning crackled briefly illuminating the rocky cliffs and grassy vales of his motherland. The Highlands were even more beautiful than he’d painstakingly re-created them in his mind, staked to the side of a cliff, dying over and over. While he’d hung there, the long killing season of ice had passed. Heather bloomed and leaves rustled on trees. Moss crushed softly beneath his boots as he shifted his weight to ease the pain in his groin. Parts of him were not yet healed. He’d been flayed too many times to regenerate properly; the bitch had scarcely let him grow new guts before taking them again.

“The body is prepared, my lord.”

Christopher and Drustan nodded while nearby, huddled in Gwen’s embrace, Chloe wept. Christian was amused to realize he, too, had nodded. Say “my lord” and every Keltar male in the room nodded along with a few of the females. Theirs was a clan of all lairds, no serfs.

It seemed a century ago he’d walked these bens and valleys, exhilarated to be alive, riveted by his studies at university and his more private agenda in Dublin: keeping tabs on the unpredictable and dangerous owner of Barrons Books & Baubles while hunting an ancient Book of black magic. But that was before the Compact the Keltar had upheld since the dawn of time had been shattered, the wall between man and Fae had fallen, and he himself had become one of the Unseelie.

“Place the body on the pyre,” Drustan said.

Chloe’s weeping turned to quiet sobs at his words, then a wild guttural keening that flayed Christian’s gut as exquisitely as had the Crimson Hag’s lance. Dageus and Chloe had fought impossible odds to be together, only to end with Dageus’s pointless death on a cliff. Christian alone bore the blame. He didn’t know how Chloe could stand to look at him.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t. She’d not once focused on him since they brought him home. Her swollen, half-dead gaze had slid repeatedly past him. He wasn’t sure if that was because she hated him

for causing her husband's death or because he no longer looked remotely like the young human man she'd known, but the worst of the dark Fae. He knew he was disconcerting to look at. Although his mutation seemed to have become static, leaving him with long black hair, strangely muted tattoos, and, for fuck's sake, wings—bloody damned wings, how the hell was a man supposed to live with those?—there was something about his eyes that even he could see. As if a chilling, starry infinity had settled there. No one held his gaze, no one looked at him for long, not even his own mother and father. His sister, Colleen, was the only one who'd spoken more than a few words to him since his return.

What remained of Dageus's body was positioned on the wood slab.

They would chant and spread the necessary elements, then burn the corpse, freeing his soul to be reborn. When the ceremony was done, his ashes would drop into the grave below, mingle with the soil, and find new life.

He moved forward to join the others, shifting his shoulders so the tips of his wings didn't drag the ground. He was getting bloody tired of having to clean them. Although he threw a constant glamour to conceal them from the sight of others, unless making a show of power, he still had to look at them himself, and he preferred not to walk around with pine needles and bits of gorse stuck to his fucking feathers.

Feathers. Bloody hell, he hadn't seen that one coming when he'd considered his future. Like a goddamn chicken.

The clan surrounded the pyre somberly. He hadn't expected to attend tonight, much less be involved, but Drustan had insisted. *You're Keltar, lad, first and foremost. You belong here*. He seemed to have forgotten Christian was a walking lie detector who knew the truth was that Drustan didn't want to be anywhere near him. But then, he didn't want to be near anyone, not even his wife, Gwen. He wanted to disappear into the mountains and grieve for his brother alone.

Once, Christian would have argued. Now he said little, only when necessary. It was easier that way.

As the chanting began and the sacred oil, water, metal, and wood were distributed east, west, north, and south, the wind whipped up violently, howling through rocky canyons and crevices. Thunder rolled and the sky rushed with ominous clouds. Grass rippled as if trod by an unseen army.

Look, listen, feel, the storm-lashed grass seemed to be whispering to him.

In the distance, the rain across the valley turned to a deluge and began moving rapidly toward them in an enormous gray sheet. Lightning exploded directly above the pyre and everyone jerked as it cracked and spread across the night sky in a web of crimson. The pungent odor of brimstone laced the air.

Something was off.

Something wasn't right.

The powerful words of the high druid burial ceremony seemed to be inflaming the elements. They should have been softening the environment, preparing the earth to welcome a high druid's body, not chafing it.

Could it be the Highlands rejected an Unseelie prince's presence at a druid ceremony? Didn't his Keltar blood still define him as one of Scotia's own?

As Christian continued chanting, restraining his voice so he wouldn't drown out the others, the storm grew more violent, the night darker. He studied his gathered clan. Man, woman, and child, they all had the right to be here. The elements had been chosen with precision and care. They were what had been used for generations untold. The pyre was properly constructed, the runes etched, the wood old, dried,

rowan and oak. The timing was correct.

There was only one other variable to consider.

He narrowed his eyes, studying Dageus's remains. He was still pondering them a few minutes later when at last the chanting was done.

"You must set him free, Chloe-lass," Drustan said, "before the storm prevents it."

He always believed he was the rotten egg of the two of us, Christian had overheard Drustan saying to Chloe earlier that evening. When the truth of it is he gave his life to save others not once but twice. He was the best of men, lass. The best of all of us.

Chloe jerked forward, carrying a torch of mistletoe-draped rowan that flickered wildly in the wind.

"Wait," Christian growled.

"What is it, lad?" Drustan said.

Chloe stopped, torch trembling in her hands, not bothering to glance at either of them. All life seemed to have been stripped out of her, leaving a shell of a body that had no desire to continue breathing. She looked as if she might join her husband in the flames. Christ, didn't anyone else see that? Why were they letting her anywhere near fire? He could taste Death on the air, feel it beckoning Chloe with a lover's kiss, wearing the mask of her dead husband.

He pushed between his aunt and the pyre to touch the wood upon which the bits of his uncle were spread. Wood that once had lived but now was dead, and in death spoke to him as nothing alive ever would again. This was his new native tongue, the utterances of the dead and dying. Closing his eyes he went inward to that alien, unwanted landscape inside him. He knew what he was. He'd known it for a long time. He had a special bond to the events occurring tonight.

The Unseelie princes were four, and each had their specialty: War, Pestilence, Famine, Death. He was Death. And Fae. Which meant more attuned, more deeply connected to the elements than a druid could ever be. His moods affected the environment if he wasn't careful to keep tight rein on them. But he wasn't the cause of the night's distress. Something else was.

There was only one other thing present whose provenance might be questioned.

None but a Keltar directly descended from the first could be given a high druid burial in hallowed ground. The cemetery was heavily protected, from the wood of sacred, carefully mutated trees that grew there to ancient artifacts, blood, and wards buried in the soil. The ground would expel any intruder. Perhaps Nature herself would resist the interment.

Was it possible what remained of the Draghar within Dageus marked him as something foreign?

Christian had heard the truth in his uncle's lie at a young age. At first, Dageus told Chloe and the rest of the clan that the Seelie queen had removed the souls of the Draghar and erased their memories from his mind. Sometime later, to aid Adam Black, Dageus had come clean with the truth...at least part of it, admitting he still retained their memories and could use their spells, though he maintained he was no longer inhabited by the living consciousness of thirteen ancient sorcerers.

Christian had never been able to get a solid feel for just how much of those power-hungry druids still lived within him. His uncle was a proud, intensely private man. Sometimes he'd believed Dageus. Other times—watching him while he thought himself unobserved—he'd been certain Dageus had never stopped being haunted by them. The few times he'd tried to question him, Dageus walked away without a word, giving him no opportunity to read him. Typical of his clan. Those aware of Christian's unique "gift" were closed-mouthed around him, even his own parents. It had made for a solitaria

childhood, a boyhood of secrets no one wanted to hear, a lad unable to reconcile the bizarreness of other's actions with the truths staring him in the face.

He eyed Dageus's remains, casting a net for possibilities, considering all, discarding nothing.

It was possible, he mused, that they had the wrong body. He couldn't fathom why Ryodan might give them the savaged pieces of someone else's corpse. Still, it was Ryodan, which meant anything was possible.

Hands resting lightly on the pile of rain-spattered timber, he turned inward, wondering if he might use his lie-detecting ability to discern the truth of the remains, or if his new talents might aid him.

An immense wind gusted within him, around him, ruffling his wings, dark and serene and enormous. Death. Ah yes, death, he'd tasted it countless times recently, come to know it intimately. It wasn't horrific. Death was a lover's kiss. It was merely the process of getting there that could be so extreme.

He harnessed the dark wind and blew a question into the bits of flesh and bone.

Dageus?

There was no reply.

He gathered his power—Unseelie, not druid—and shoved it into the mutilated body, let it soak in the remains and arrange itself there...

“Bloody hell,” he whispered. He had his answer.

Thirty-eight years of human life lay on the slab, terminated abruptly. *Pain, sorrow, grief!* But not by the lance of the Crimson Hag. *Make it stop!* A poison in the blood, an overdose of something human, chemical, sweet and cloying. He stretched his newfound senses and sucked in a harsh breath when he felt the dying, the moment of it, rushing like a glorious wave over (him!) the man. It had been sought, embraced. Relief, ah, blessed relief. *Thank you*, was the man's final thought, *yes, yes, make all stop, let me sleep, but let me sleep!* He actually heard the words in a soft Irish burr, as if frozen in time, rustling dryly from the remains.

He opened his eyes and looked at Drustan, who fixed his deep silver gaze on a spot slightly above and between his brows.

“It's not Dageus,” Christian said, “but an Irishman with two children who were killed the night the walls fell. His wife perished from starvation not long after as they hid from Unseelie in the streets. He tried to go on without them until the day he no longer cared to. He met his death by choice.”

No one questioned how he knew it. No one questioned anything about him anymore.

Chloe staggered and melted bonelessly to the ground, her torch tumbling forgotten to the wet grass. “N-N-Not D-Dageus?” she whispered. “What do you mean? Is he alive, then?” Her voice rose. “Tell me, is he still alive?” she shrieked, eyes flashing.

Christian closed his eyes again, feeling, stretching, reaching. But life was no longer his specialty. “I don't know.”

“But can you feel his *death*?” Colleen said sharply, and he opened his eyes, meeting her gaze. To his surprise, she didn't look away.

Ah, so she knew. Or suspected. She'd stayed with the *sidhe*-seers, searching their old lore. She'd come across the old tales. How had she decided which one he was?

Again, he slipped deep, staring sightlessly. It was peaceful. Quiet. No judgment. No lies. Death was so beautifully without deceit. He appreciated the purity of it.

In the distance, Colleen tried unsuccessfully to turn a gasp into a cough. He was fairly certain she wasn't looking at his eyes now.

That eerie Fae wind gusted and blew open the confines of his skull, leveled barriers of space and time. He felt a soaring sensation, as if he'd taken flight through a door to some other way of breathing and being: quiet and black, rich and velvety and vast. *Dageus*, he murmured silently, *Dageus*, *Dageus*. People had a certain individual feel, an essence, an imprint. Their life made a ripple in a loch of the universe.

There was no Dageus ripple.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Chloe," he said quietly. Sorry he couldn't say yes. Sorry he'd dragged them into his problems. Sorry he'd gone bugfuck crazy for a time, for so damned many things. But sorry was worthless. It changed nothing. Merely coerced the victim to offer forgiveness for what you shouldn't have done to begin with. "He's dead."

On the ground near the pyre, Chloe wrapped her arms around her knees and began to keel, rocking back and forth.

"You're absolutely certain it's no' him, lad?" Drustan said.

"Unequivocally." The owner of Chester's had packed them off with another man's remains intending for them to bury it and never know that somewhere out there a Keltar body rotted and a high druid soul was lost, denied proper burial, never to be reborn.

Knowing Ryodan, he'd simply considered it a waste of his precious time to make the hard hike down into the gorge and search the darkness for remains when there were so many more easily available in any city he'd driven through on the way back to Dublin. Coming by Keltar plaid wouldn't have been difficult. The entire clan had been living for a time at the fuck's nightclub.

"You can't bury that man here," Christian said. "He must be returned to Ireland. He wants to go home." He had no idea how he knew that the corpse didn't want to stay here. It wanted to be in a place not far from Dublin, a short distance to the south where a small cottage overlooked a pond smattered with lily pads, tall reeds grew, and in the summer the rich baritone of frogs filled the night. He could see it clearly in his mind. He resented seeing it. He wanted nothing to do with the last wishes of the dead. He was not their keeper. Nor their bloody damned wish granter.

Drustan cursed. "If this isn't him, then where the blethering hell is my brother's body?"

"Where, indeed," Christian said.

“These iron bars can’t hold my soul in, all I need is you...”

The cavernous chamber was well-sealed against human and Fae with magic not even I understood.

Fortuitously, he didn’t need to.

He was neither human nor Fae but one of the old ones from the dawn of time. Even now, his true name forgotten, the world still regarded him as powerful, indestructible.

Nothing will survive nuclear holocausts save the cockroaches.

They were right. He’d survived it before. The acute burst had been an irritant, little more. The lingering radiation had mutated him into more than he’d ever been.

He partitioned himself, separated and deposited a tiny segment of his being on the floor near the door. He despised being the insect beneath man’s feet. He coveted the life of the bastards that reviled and crushed him at every opportunity. He’d believed for a long time the one he served would eventually grant him what he sought. Make him what he’d observed with crippling envy, a tall, unkillable, unsegmented beast. The glory of it—to walk as man, indestructible as a cockroach!

He’d lived with the threat of the one weapon that could destroy him for too long. If he could not be one of them, at the very least he wanted that weapon back, buried, lost, forgotten.

But stealing from the one who’d stolen it from its ancient hiding place had proved impossible. He’d been trying for a small eternity. The beast that would be king made no mistakes.

Now there was one he believed just might be more powerful than the one he served.

As he slithered flat as paper and pushed his shiny brown body into a crack too small for humans to see, he knew something had changed before he even passed beneath the door and crossed the threshold.

He despised the way his mind instantly went into information-gathering mode, trained—he, once a god himself—*trained* to spy on fools and heathens.

They were the bugs. Not he.

This was *his* mission. No one else’s. Yet he’d been conditioned to collect bits of knowledge for so long, he now did so by instinct. Engulfed in sudden rage, he forgot about his body for a moment and inadvertently wedged his hindquarters beneath a too-narrow rough-hewn edge. Seething, he forced himself forward, sacrificing his legs at the femur, and half scuttled, half dragged himself into the room silently, unseen.

The one they called “Papa Roach” in their papers sat, rubbing his antennae together, thinking

Preparing for his new venture.

He'd been duplicitous in the past, playing both sides against the middle, but this was his greatest deceit—informing Ryodan the chamber beneath the abbey was impenetrable.

He wanted it—and its occupant—off Ryodan's radar.

This potential ally, this opportunity was his alone.

He hissed softly, rustled forward on his front legs, dragging his cerci uncomfortably, until he stopped at the edge of the cage.

It was empty, two bars missing.

“Behind you,” a deep voice echoed from the shadows.

He startled and turned awkwardly, hissing, pivoting on his thorax. Few saw him. Fewer still even saw him as more than a nuisance.

“You have been here before.” The dark prince was sprawled on the floor, leaning back against the wall, wings spread wide. “And I have seen you in Chester's, in Ryodan's company more than once. Don't look so surprised, small one,” he said with a soft laugh. “There's a decided dearth of events here. A bit of stone dust crumbles. Occasionally a spider passes through. Of course I notice. You are not Fae. Yet you are sentient. Make that sound again if I am correct.”

The cockroach hissed.

“Do you serve Ryodan?”

He hissed again, this time with eons of hatred and anger, his entire small body trembling with the passion of it. Antennae vibrating, he spat a chirp of fury so hard he lost his balance and floundered wildly on his belly.

The winged prince laughed. “Yes, yes, I share the sentiment.”

The cockroach pushed up on his front legs and shook himself, then tapped the floor with one of his remaining appendages, rhythmically, in summons.

Roaches poured beneath the door, rushing to join him, piling on top of one another until at last they formed the stumpy-legged shape of a human.

The Unseelie prince watched in silence, waiting until he'd carefully positioned the many small bodies to form ears and a mouth.

“He dispatches you to check on me,” Cruce murmured.

“He believes I can no longer enter this chamber,” the glistening pile of cockroaches grated.

“Ah.” The prince pondered his words. “You seek an alliance.”

“I offer it. For a price.”

“I'm listening.”

“The one who controls me has a blade. I want it.”

“Free me and it is yours,” Cruce said swiftly.

“Not even I can open the doors that hold you.”

“There was a time I believed nothing could weaken the bars of my prison save the bastard king. Then one came, removed my cuff and disturbed the spell. All is temporary.” Cruce was silent for a moment, then, “Continue taking information to Ryodan. But bring it to me as well. All of it. Or nothing. I want to know every detail that transpires beyond those doors. When the chamber was sealed, I lost my ability to project. I can no longer see or affect matter above. I escaped my cage y

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