



Burned: Fever Series Book 7

By Karen Marie Moning

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MacKayla Lane and Jericho Barrons return in the blockbuster Fever series from Karen Marie Moning.

It's easy to walk away from lies. Power is another thing.

MacKayla Lane would do anything to save the home she loves. A gifted *sidhe*-seer, she's already fought and defeated the deadly *Sinsar Dubh*—an ancient book of terrible evil—yet its hold on her has never been stronger.

When the wall that protected humans from the seductive, insatiable Fae was destroyed on Halloween, long-imprisoned immortals ravaged the planet. Now Dublin is a war zone with factions battling for control. As the city heats up and the ice left by the Hoar Frost King melts, tempers flare, passions run red-hot, and dangerous lines get crossed. Seelie and Unseelie vie for power against nine ancient immortals who have governed Dublin for millennia; a rival band of *sidhe*-seers invades the city, determined to claim it for their own; Mac's former protégé and best friend, Dani “Mega” O'Malley, is now her fierce enemy; and even more urgent, Highland druid Christian MacKeltar has been captured by the Crimson Hag and is being driven deeper into Unseelie madness with each passing day. The only one Mac can depend on is the powerful, dangerous immortal Jericho Barrons, but even their fiery bond is tested by betrayal.

It's a world where staying alive is a constant struggle, the line between good and evil is blurred, and every alliance comes at a price. In an epic battle against dark forces, Mac must decide who she can trust, and what her survival is ultimately worth.

Look for all of Karen Marie Moning's sensational Fever novels:
DARKFEVER | BLOODFEVER | FAEFEVER | DREAMFEVER |
SHADOWFEVER | ICED | BURNED | FEVERBORN | FEVERSONG

Praise for *Burned*

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

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Dear Reader,

If this is the first book you've picked up in the Fever series, at the end of Burned, 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, when they were introduced, 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. You'll find a few nuggets not mentioned in the books. The guide features characters by type, followed by places and then things.

To the new reader, welcome to the Fever world.

To the devoted readers who make it possible for me to do what I love every day, welcome back.

Karen

Eleven months ago, the Clarin House Hotel

Dublin, Ireland

August 6, BWC

JERICHO BARRONS

"Who is it?"

Two a.m. Humans sleep. Her voice through the door is drowsy, sweet, southern, and young. So fucking young. Innocent. In my zoo, MacKayla Lane is an exotic.

"Jericho Barrons."

"What do you want?" All trace of slumber is gone from her voice. She couldn't sound more awake if she'd rolled over on a rattlesnake in her bed.

I laugh silently, mirthlessly. More than she can handle. "We have information to exchange. You want to know what it is. I want to know what you know about it."

"Bright guy, aren't you? I figured that out back at the store. What took you so long?"

Sarcasm fails to mask the fear in her voice. I choose my next words carefully. I want her to open the door of her own accord, invite me in. It means something, that courtesy. "I am unaccustomed to asking for what I want. Nor am I accustomed to bartering with a woman."

She is silent a moment, liking my reply, that I placed her in a class of women with whom I am willing to barter. It makes her feel she has a modicum of control over the situation—as if I am a "situation." What stands on her doorstep is a fucking cataclysm. Words. Why do they always ask for words? Why do they ever believe them?

"Well, get used to it with me, bud, because I don't take orders from anyone. And I don't give up anything for free."

She called me "bud."

I might kill her for that alone before I'm done questioning her.

"Do you intend to open this door, Ms. Lane, or shall we converse where anyone might attend our business?"

Formality makes her perceive me as older than I am, less dangerous. I will wear any skin to get in.

"Do you really intend to exchange information?"

"I do."

"And you'll go first?"

"I will." So fucking gullible.

"We can trade through the door."

In her dreams. My dick isn't that long. I came here for two things. I'm not leaving without them. "No."

"Why not?"

"I am a private person, Ms. Lane. This is not negotiable."

"But I—"

“No.”

“How did you find me?”

Bedsprings squeak. The sound of jeans being pulled on.

“You procured a hired conveyance at my establishment.”

“We call them taxis where I come from. And bookstores.”

Is that a little spine? Does she have a backbone under all that fluff? “We call them manners where I come from, Ms. Lane.”

“You should talk,” she grumbles. “It’s not my fault. Being threatened brings out the worst in me.”

She opens the door. Peers out. Puny--ass chain across it. I could break it with a blink.

Fuck, I think. Just that. A multitude of various fucks all in one great big clusterfuck. As in: I am fucked if I want this .??. this .??. newborn imbecile. And she is so fucked if I take her. And fuck if I’m going to walk away. Letting her leave my store was bad enough. Should have killed the cabbie. Taken what I wanted then. Innocent. Soft. Smells good. Sleep--swollen. Hair a blond tangle of invitation for a fist. I see it spilling down her back, grazing the curves of her ass. Me under her, behind her. Driving up into her. What will she do? Say? How does she sound when she comes? Does she, like most women, lose a part of her soul in sex? Leave it lying there for the taking? Fuck. “May I come in?” I don’t smile. My smiles don’t make people relax.

“I wouldn’t have let you up this far.”

Her eyes are green, angry. Her nipples are hard. Lust is absurd. It strikes in the strangest places at the oddest times. She doesn’t even realize she’s feeling it. She’s erected a barricade of propriety and lies between us. I despise the type of woman she is. I loathe her soft pink innocence. My body doesn’t concur. I wonder why her? Why not, say, a streetlamp, for all we have in common? She’s chiffon and satin ribbons. I’m raw meat and razor blades. I have never been drawn to my opposite. I like what I am. “Your nipples are hard,” I murmur, allowing her the choice to hear it, or pretend she didn’t.

She blinks, shakes her head. “How did you get up here?”

Ah, the human ear has splendid filters. “I told them I was your brother.”

“Right. Because we look so much alike.”

The lace of her sleep--shirt flutters with each breath. She’s trembling, trying to conceal it. I glance beyond her, at the tiny room. It’s little better than a let--by--the--hour. It won’t take that long to get what I came for. Business first. “Well, Ms. Lane?”

“I’m thinking.”

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Don’t be a jackass.”

“You have till the count of three, then I leave. Two.”

“Oh, fine, come in,” she snaps.

I do smile then but permit it only because she has closed the door to unhook the chain and can’t see me. She opens it and steps back. I have found there to be little distance between the unlatching of a chain and the spreading of a woman’s legs. As if they can never unbar only a single entrance. It’s a disease called hope. She pushes the door flat to the wall. She thinks it makes her safe. I enter. Don’t bother to close it. That will come later. She toes a rug and a lacy bra beneath the bed. I will see much more than that before I leave.

“So, what is it? No, wait—how do you spell it?”

I pace a circle around her. She spins as I stalk her, unwilling to give me her back. I’m going to have it anyway. Every way. “S--i--n--s--a--r.”

“Sinsar?”

“Shi--sa. Shi--sa--du.” I continue pacing. I like the way her body moves. If she glances down, she’ll see my coat is open and my suit fails to conceal how hard I am. She never takes her gaze from my face. Few keep it there.

“Oh, that makes great sense. And the du?”

I stop circling, facing the door. She stops, her back to it. Three feet separate us. I can feel her. Smell her.

“D--u--b--h.”

“Dubh is ‘do’? Should I be calling pubs ‘poos’?”

“Dubh is Gaelic, Ms. Lane. Pub is not.”

“Don’t bust a gut laughing.”

“Nothing about the Sinsar Dubh is a laughing matter.”

“I stand corrected. So what is this gravest of graves?”

Flippant. She has no business being here. Fio was right.

It would be merciful, Jericho. Kill her quickly before one of the others tortures her for days then rips out her throat.

Does mercy look like my middle fucking name?

Do it for me, Jericho. I can’t bear the thought of what one of the others will do to her.

One of them? Or me, Fiona? Which thought can’t you bear?

I saw the look in your eyes. Jericho, how could you want that .??. that .??. that foolish, empty-headed child! What could she possibly offer you?

“Too long,” I say. Fiona has been with me too long.

“What?” she says blankly.

I’m suddenly furious that MacKayla Lane came to my city, thinks to play on the same field with me and mine, made herself my problem in any capacity. “Go home, Ms. Lane. Be young. Be pretty. Get married. Have pretty babies. Grow old with your pretty husband.”

“Oh, screw you, Jericho Barrons! Tell me what it is. You said you would.”

“If you insist. Don’t be a fool. Don’t insist.”

“I’m insisting. What is it?”

“Last chance.” For many things.

“Too bad. I don’t want a last chance. Tell me.”

I was lying anyway. Her last chance was her first one. She walked through my door. “The Sinsar Dubh is a book.”

“A book? That’s all? Just a book?”

“On the contrary, Ms. Lane, never make that mistake. Never think it just a book. It is an exceedingly rare and exceedingly ancient manuscript countless people would kill to possess.”

“Including you? Would you kill to possess it?”

“Absolutely. Anyone and anything that gets in my way. Always have. Always will. Reconsidering your stay, Ms. Lane?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You’ll be going home in a box, then.”

“Is that another of your threats?”

“It is not me who will put you there.”

“Who will?”

“I answered your question, now it’s your turn to answer mine. What do you know of the Sinsar Dubh, Ms. Lane? Tell me. And don’t lie. I’ll know.” I could Voice her, force her to tell me everything. Little fun there.

“My sister was studying here. She was killed a month ago. She left me a voice--mail message right before she died, telling me I had to find the Sinsar Dubh.”

“Why?”

“She didn’t say. She just said everything depended on it.”

“Where is this message? I must hear it myself.”

“I accidentally deleted it.” Her gaze darts to the side.

“Liar. You would make no such mistake with a sister you care enough about to die for. Where is it? If you are not with me, Ms. Lane, you are against me. I have no mercy for my enemies.”

“I already gave a copy of this recording to the Dublin Gardai. They’re working to track down the man she was involved with.” There goes her gaze again.

"Give me your phone."

"Not a chance. But I'll put it on speakerphone."

She plays the message. Never takes her gaze from my face. The things I could teach her .??. if she could survive them.

"Did you know my sister?"

I slice my head once to the left in silent negation.

"You were both after this 'exceedingly rare book' yet never ran into each other?"

"Dublin is a city of a million--odd people inundated daily by countless commuters and besieged by a never-ending wave of tourists, Ms. Lane. The oddity would be if we had encountered each other. What did she mean by 'you don't even know what you are'?"

"I wondered that myself. I have no idea."

"None?"

"None."

"Hmm. This was all she left you? A message?"

She nods.

"Nothing more? No note or package or anything of the sort?"

She slices her head once to the left in silent negation. I scan her eyes. Deep but there, a hidden mirth. She just mocked me. My dick gets harder.

"And you had no idea what she meant by the Sinsar Dubh? Your sister didn't confide in you?"

"I used to think she did. Apparently I was wrong."

"Who did she mean by 'them'?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me that."

"I am not one of these 'them,' if that is what you're inferring. Many seek the Sinsar Dubh, both individuals and factions. I want it as well, but I work alone."

"Why do you want it?"

"It is priceless. I am a book collector."

"And that makes you willing to kill for it? What do you plan to do with it? Sell it to the highest bidder?"

"If you don't approve of my methods, stay out of my way."

"Fine."

"Fine. What else have you to tell me, Ms. Lane?"

"Not a thing." She jerks a frosty look from me to the door.

I laugh. "I do believe I'm being dismissed. I can't recall the last time I was dismissed." Let her think I'm leaving. It's time to close the door.

I'm nearly past her, nearly at the door, when I grab her and slam her back against my body. The back of her skull thuds into my chest. Her teeth clack together. She makes a wordless sound, protest, and another more guttural sound that is not protest at all. I band an arm beneath her breasts.

I can smell when a woman wants to fuck. I smelled it in my store. I smell it now. She can't see herself yet, she certainly can't see me, can't admit what she wants. But her body knows. Lust is a thing of the blood. Doesn't need head or heart. Her flesh is soft and pink. Her blood is red hot.

"What are you doing?"

"Need a fucking manual?" I press hard against her ass.

"You've got to be kidding! You're totally not my type and you're .??. you're .??. how old are you anyway? Eeew!"

"Your scent says otherwise." I inhale. So much sweeter this close.

"My scent? Like you think you can smell—you think I— Oh! Let me go! Now! Get off me! I'm going to scream."

"You will most certainly scream. I promise you that." Beneath my arm, her heart hammers, she breathes quick and shallow. Sexual excitement alters the lines of her body, fuses it into new lines against mine. A woman's spine changes when she wants to fuck, a subtle, supple shifting at the base, a sharper curve at that

hollow where back meets ass. Breasts tighten and lift, the slant of jaw changes as the mouth prepares and muscles draw tight. I have studied humans for a small eternity. Intent infuses their every movement. Road maps to their inner navigation, plastered all over their skin. Born to be slaves.

"You're delusional. I don't want you. Get out of my room."

"So you can crawl back into bed, weep for the sister you lost and brood about your own ineptitude? Scribble down your silly plans and plot vengeance? You don't even know what the word means." But she could learn.

"Are you in such a hurry to be alone with your grief? Is it such a grand bedmate? When's the last time you lost yourself in a good, hard fuck, Ms. Lane? Have you ever? I think it's always been gentle, nice and sanitary, and when it was over you lay there wondering what all the fuss was about."

"You're crazy! You know that, right? You're abso--frigging--lutely crazy. How dare you come in here and threaten and bully and be shitty to me then try to sleep with me? Then make fun of perfectly good sex!"

"I have no desire to sleep with you. I want to fuck you. And there is no such thing as perfectly good sex. If it's 'perfectly good,'?" I mock in falsetto, "he should be shot in the head and put out of everyone's misery. Sex either blows your fucking mind or it's not good enough. You want me to blow your fucking mind, Ms. Lane? Come on. Do it. Be a big girl."

Her whole body jerks in my arms. "I don't even like you."

"I don't like you either. But my dick is hard and you're wet—"

"You can't know that!"

My hand slides to the top button of her fly. "Want me to prove it? If you persist in lying, you leave me no choice." I pop the first button, then the second. Her spine changes against my back, yet more curve, more pliancy. The human body is remarkable.

"Are you wet, Ms. Lane? Yes or no?" When she makes no reply, I pop the third button. "Let's make a deal. I'll check, and if you're dry I'll leave."

She hisses.

"Answer the question."

"It's none of your business."

"Tell me to stop." I pop the fourth button. There's only one left.

"I hate you."

"I can live with that. Have you fucked since your sister was murdered? Let go, Ms. Lane. For once in your circumscribed little life, let the fuck go."

She is suddenly steel in my arms. She pushes back with her hips, twists and turns in my arms, slams her hands into my chest and knees me in the balls. Or tries. I block it with a knee at the last second.

"You don't know anything about me!" Her chest heaves, a pulse beats wildly at her throat.

"I know you better than those you call your best friends. I see you."

"Yeah?" Her jaw juts. Something flashes deep in her eyes. I go still. What was that? Something very different from what she shows on the surface. I didn't expect it. Interesting. "Just what the fuck do you see?" she practically snarls.

"A woman who's lived in a cage all her life. And hates it. Bored in there, aren't you? Waiting for life to happen. And when it finally does, it steals from you what you loved most. So take back. Explode. Lash out. Blow up."

She stares up at me, wets her lip.

"Scream. Curse. Rage. Take it out on me." I step forward, cup her hard between her legs, rub with my palm. The heat she's throwing off is amazing. "Tell me to stop."

She is motionless a long moment. Finally she slices her head once to the left.

I laugh.

I shove my hand down her pants, the fifth button pops off and clatters across the floor, I push my finger inside her and her knees go out from under her as she clamps down on me, hard. She's so fucking wet. We go down to the floor together.

"I'm sick of feeling like this," she hisses. "I hate my life. I hate everything about it!" She strangles me with

my tie, clumsy in her haste to get it off. Still living in the world where boys undress completely and girls lie back and wait. Only two things need to be naked.

“Fuck the tie. Unzip my pants.”

She yanks it open so hard she breaks the zipper of my ten-thousand-dollar suit. I pick her up by the waist of her jeans and dump her out of them. She pushes up from the floor to turn but I’m behind her. I shove her back to the floor. “Stay there. I want you this way.”

“But you said I could—”

“Your turn next.”

“This is about me, remember? That’s what you said. I want what I want now.”

“Try, Ms. Lane, just try.”

To her credit, she does. But I’m stronger. I get my way first, not that she’s complaining from the noise she’s making. Fist in her hair, I spread her legs wide as they’ll go, crush her flat to the floor. Later I’ll take her on her hands and knees. Now I need her still as I can keep her. I grind between her legs and she makes a choking noise. Slick with all that wet she supposedly wasn’t, I drive into her. Air explodes from us both. She arches her neck and howls. I don’t move for a moment. Movement will fuck me royally right now.

She bucks beneath me. “Move, you bastard!”

“When I’m ready.”

I close my hands on her ribs. She fights. She’ll be bruised in the morning. I dredge up a few hated memories. My blood goes cold. I get harder. I begin to move, lose track of time. Four hours feel like four minutes. For something so soft, she takes her fucking hard, with a twist. I taste her. I could eat her alive. She closes her mouth on my dick. I close my hands on her head. I might not let her go. Slick with sweat, I defile her with reverence. Or revere her with defilement. Every. Inch. Of. Her. Motherfuckingfinebody. She likes it. No holds barred with this woman. I wouldn’t have believed it of her. And she does scream .??.

Later I roll over on my back and let her rock her world all over me. Fuck if she doesn’t.

She straddles me, ass to my face, reverse cowgirl, tangled hair swinging. And son of a bitch, the woman can ride. “Slow down.” I close my hands on her ass to keep her from jacking me off in seconds.

She pushes up, drops her head down into a wet dream of a naked crouch that doesn’t have one fucking ounce of inhibition, and shoots me a feral look between her legs, around my dick. “Stop holding me,” she snaps.

“You’re a control freak. This turn is mine. Do what I tell you. If that means you come and get hard again, deal with it.” She arches a brow. “Unless I’m wearing you out.”

I smirk and say nothing. She knows by now that’s impossible.

“Don’t think this means I want to see you tomorrow.” She’s back at it and I’m about to explode.

“I suffer no such delusion. And ditto,” I say savagely. She knows exactly how to work me, sliding up to the point where I’m almost out of her, teasing the head of my cock with short, fast pops of her hips before slamming down and easing back out slow. Pretty, pink Barbie fucks hard and raw like an animal.

Her head is thrown back, spine arched, she’s oblivious to rules, to moral order, to all but inner imperatives. And I wonder: could she live like she fucks?

My dick gets even harder.

I leave just before dawn.

At the door I turn back and look at her. And shake my head. Her back is to me. She’s wrapped a sheet around herself.

“Mac.”

She turns slowly and I say Fuck beneath my breath. Already she’s changing. It began when I started putting my clothes on. Now it’s nearly complete. Her eyes are different. Wary, guarded, tinged with that human emotion I despise the most: regret. I was wrong. She wasn’t ready. Not yet.

By noon she’ll hate me. By tonight she’ll have convinced herself I raped her. By tomorrow she’ll hate herself.

I cross the room, clamp a hand over her mouth and crush my arm across her chest, compressing her lungs so she can’t draw a breath. She lives at my discretion. I can take her breath. I can give it back.

I wonder, pushed to the wall, stripped of all defenses, tested beyond endurance, just who might MacKayla Lane become?

I press my mouth to her ear. My words are soft. “Go home, Ms. Lane. You don’t belong here. Drop it with the Gardai. Stop asking questions. Do not seek the Sinsar Dubh or you will die in Dublin. I haven’t been hunting it this long and gotten this close to let anyone get in my way and fuck things up. There are two kinds of people in this world: those who survive no matter the cost, and those who are walking victims.” I lick the vein fluttering in the side of her neck. Her heart is beating like a frightened rabbit. Fear doesn’t arouse me. Yet my dick is so hard again that it hurts. I should end it here. Rip out her throat, leave her dead in her dingy, small flat. Perhaps I’ll kill her tomorrow. Perhaps I’ll chain her in my bookstore for a time. I’ll give her a single chance to run. If she stays, I am absolved of responsibility for anything that befalls her. “You, Ms. Lane, are a victim, a lamb in a city of wolves. I’ll give you until nine p.m. tomorrow to get the bloody hell out of this country and out of my way.”

I let her go, and she crumples to the floor.

Then I bend over her, touch her face, whisper the ancient words of a druid spell, and when I am done the only memories she retains of this night are of conversation and threat. She will never know that tonight she was mine.

Don’t hide your mistakes,
'Cause they’ll find you, burn you
—“Get Out Alive” by Three Days Grace

Part I

Some of us are born more than once.
Some of us re-create ourselves many times.
Ryodan says adaptability is survivability.
Ryodan says a lot of stuff.
Sometimes I listen.
All I know is every time I open my eyes,
My brain kicks on, something wakes up deep in my belly
And I know I’ll do anything it takes.
To. Just. Keep. Breathing.
—From the journals of Danielle O’Malley

PROLOGUE

Fire to his ice, frost to her flame.
The Unseelie King stared down at the unconscious woman in his wings. She was his soul mate. He knew it the moment he found her. He’d been tortured by it every moment since he’d lost her.
In the brief time they’d shared together, he’d experienced the only true joy of his existence. Before that, darkness had ebbed and flowed in him as incessant as a stormy sea. He’d thought perhaps it was because he was young and in a quarter of a million years, give or take a few, the disquiet might ease.
To pass the restless eons, he’d made things, scraping together matter and reshaping it into mountains and trees, oceans and deserts, planets and stars, galaxies and black holes. All but one power was his: the Song of Making, which legend said had begun it all and could call forth the very fundamentals of existence. That magic belonged to the queen of his race alone.
The Seelie Queen rarely used any portion of the cataclysmic melody. As with all great power, it demanded great price. Legend held their race had stolen the sacred song in times more ancient than any of them recalled, as humans had stolen fire from their gods. If this seemed to imply the Fae had gods, the king knew

better. There was nothing out there but him. He'd been looking for a long time.

Epochs passed. Civilizations rose and fell. Bored, dissatisfied, the king built and wrecked worlds and built again. He made a halfhearted attempt to live for a time at court with the Seelie Queen and count the centuries by her petty intrigues. The ancient tapestries claimed she had been sung into existence just for him. But her views were cold and limited, her court too gaudy and bright for eyes that had stared for eons at black velvet and stars, and theirs was a discordant melody with no fire.

Again, he wandered. Edgy. Alone. Seeking something he couldn't name.

On a tiny world in a tiny corner of a tiny and utterly unimpressive universe he wasn't even certain why he'd visited, he found her. Unpredictable, high--tempered, happy on her own, and nearly untamable, she was a challenge to seduce. It hadn't helped that he was broody, arrogant, selfish, and a god.

She didn't want a soul mate, she told him. And she certainly didn't want one with wings and an attitude problem.

Yet she'd not run. She stood her ground and watched him circle around her looking for a way into her heart. They fought, tested each other, challenged and demanded.

She knew what she wanted: the best.

He knew what he was: the best.

They enhanced each other's finest qualities, as true love will. He opened her provincial mind to galaxies of opportunity. She reminded him what it was to feel wonder and brought freshness to creations gone dull and stagnant. Together they spun universes more beautiful and imaginative than anything he'd created before. Yet his happiness was tainted by something he'd never felt. He loved. He could lose. Human, she possessed a mere fifty more years at best, and with the passage of time would wither and die.

Unable to bear her mortality, the king constructed an opulent cage beyond time where death could never touch her.

Wild at heart, she'd despised his cage, but loved him more and agreed to dwell within it until that day came she could no longer bear it. They met in a shared boudoir of shadows and light and their love knew no bounds.

Still the king could not rest. He knew his woman's high temper, her need for freedom, and wanted her to have no limits. He sought the Seelie Queen's aid, but jealously she refused to use her magic to make his lover immortal.

On that day, he vowed to re-create the Song of Making himself, if it took him half of forever and cost him all that he held dear.

Vows, like wishes, are dangerous things.

Precision matters.

In time, the king came to understand part of the song's essence, glimpsed the fundamental building blocks. The fragments he melded into the partial song that birthed his dark, imperfect Unseelie were composed of exacting frequencies that interlocked seamlessly and made of their parts a far richer melody than their individual notes, chords, and vibrations.

Eons passed while he worked, until the day came he rushed to his lover's chamber with the results of his latest experiment, so certain of his success that he'd brought a vial of the new elixir to her himself—only to find her dead by her own hand.

Or so a treacherous enemy had made him believe.

They are replaceable, one and all, the Fear Dorcha, dark traveling companion through the king's subsequent madness, had insisted. You will forget her.

But he never had.

Grief will pass, lisped the Crimson Hag, one of his more exquisitely terrible creations.

But it never did.

Even the grotesque Sweeper, who fancied himself a god, collector of broken, powerful things with which he liked to tinker, had lumbered beside him for a time, offering solace or perhaps merely studying him to see if he, too, could be collected, fixed.

He, who had once been whole, was halved, without hope of ever being complete again. And when you've known that kind of love, to endure the creeping passage of time without it is to live a half-life where nothing ever feels real.

He fabricated their reunion in countless illusions, slipping in and out of insanity, talking to her as if she were beside him, answering.

He'd lived lie after lie to escape the unbearable truth: she'd left him by choice, killed herself to escape him.

She'd left him a poisoned barb of a note that to this day infected him still: You have become a monster.

There is nothing left of the man I love.

He carried it still, a small scroll tied with a lock of her hair. Despite Cruce's confession, he would carry it until the day she told him she was not its author.

The king stirred from his reverie and stared down at the unconscious female in his wings. It had been half a million years since he'd found her lying, lifeless, in their chamber. Since he'd dumped all the forbidden, arcane magic he'd used for his experiments into an ensorcelled tome, thinking to be free of that which she'd so despised.

Since he'd last held her. Touched her.

It was no illusion. She was here. She was real. Joy, that elusive, priceless commodity, was once again his.

He inhaled. She smelled the same as she had on the day he'd met her, of sunshine on bare skin, moonlight on silver oceans and enormous, sky--no--limit dreams. He closed his eyes and opened them.

She was still there.

After an eternity of grief and regret, he held the only thing he'd ever wanted as much as he wanted to be God.

A second chance.

Gazing down at her now, he found it simple to pardon Cruce for stealing her, forcing her to drink from the cauldron and erasing all memory of their time together, because somehow his soul mate was at long last the very thing he'd struggled to make her: Fae, immortal unless killed in one of a very small number of ways. He would eradicate those ways in short order.

He was whole again.

The Unseelie King bent his head and brushed his lips to hers. Lightly. Reverently. He'd sliced open his being and bled it out over memories of the woman he would never kiss again.

If there was anything divine in the Cosmos besides him, it was this moment, occupying space with her, the frequency of the vibration of her fundamental essence and his combined. Deep in his chest thunder rolled.

Lashes fluttered. She opened her eyes.

He drew back and stared down at her, unable to speak. Creator of worlds, God, Devil, he who toyed with the very matter of galaxies, words failed him now. His black wings shuddered with the intensity of his emotion.

He shifted and resettled them.

There was wonder in her gaze as she stared up at him: a moment of precious, preconscious dawn where all is dew and promise and anything at all might bloom.

Beginnings are fragile things.

Was it as he hoped? Was the power of true love greater than the power of the Cauldron of Forgetting? Did the body recall, despite the damage done to the mind—memory, carved into gray matter, never obliterated? What would she say? What would her first words to him be?

Time ground to a halt and, as a human might hold his breath, the Unseelie King held his existence in silence, occupying the frozen moment with the study of tiny miracles: the silver--blond waterfall of her hair, the blush of her lips, the elegance of her bones.

Was that a flicker of confusion? Of duality preceding recognition? He knew her face intimately, had never forsaken a nuance, yet these were expressions he'd had no cause to learn.

After all she'd been through—eternities about which he knew nothing and might have contained any number of atrocities spent as they were at the Seelie Court with Cruce -but more recently kidnapped, interred in a tomb of ice, and nearly killed by the power--hungry prince—he sought to reassure her by simplifying

himself, reducing his essence again and again until it was small enough to string word to word and form sentences: alien to the stuff of which he was made but so necessary for finite beings.

“My love, you are safe. I have you now.” He paused, to lend emphasis to his next words, a pledge he would keep until the end of time, which he was fairly certain he was in some fashion or another. “And I will never let you go again.”

Envisioning their joyous future together as immortals, he waited for the first sound of her voice in half a million years.

She screamed.

1

“It’s easier to run.

Replacing this pain with something numb”

DANI

So I’m blowing through the streets of Dublin—after ditching Ryodan’s Humvee, giving him one less excuse to come looking for me, not that he seems to need any, other than because he likes to piss all over my day—trying to prioritize my plans for the future.

At the top of my list is figuring out how to save Christian from the Crimson Hag, publishing a much-needed Dani Daily to let folks know the latest scoop, rescuing folks stranded by the killer ice storm, while simultaneously devising stellar new ways to irritate the owner of Chester’s.

After that are a few dozen subgoals I’m having a hard time putting in the right order, like getting in the know with the new Haven at the abbey, testing Dancer’s Papa Roach weapon, figuring out who’s stockpiling supplies and where so I can raid them, setting up new hidey--holes no one can find, and putting the big kibosh on Jo and Ryodan.

Problem is, I want to make breaking up Jo and Ryodan number one on my list, which is stupid because there’s nothing but personal satisfaction I’d gain from it, and while I’m all about personal satisfaction, I’m beginning to see a pattern: jumping on the short--term--gratification train always seems to wreck me off the rails somehow. But criminy, he doesn’t deserve her! And they’re not even in the same league, and seeing them do that campfire--cuddle thing tonight about made the top of my head pop off!

Second problem is I keep bumping into snowdrifts, which knocks me out of fast--mo and butchers my concentration. Since I’m getting nowhere fast with my sublist and it’s more important than me actually getting to any particular place fast, I drop out of freeze--frame and start trudging around ice--crusted snowdrifts.

Bugger it, I forgot how cold it was down here!

In hyperspeed I vibrate too fast to feel. Slow--mo, my breath frosts the air and my eyeballs chill like little shrimp cocktails on ice.

I scowl when I realize where I am—Temple Bar, not too far from Barrons Books & Baubles.

I don’t walk these blocks often. I may have defeated one of the worst Unseelie of all time tonight at the abbey but the silence and desolation of what once was the heart of the boisterous, craic--filled Temple Bar District dampens my exuberance every time I encounter it.

I can’t forget how this part of the city used to be, crammed with people laughing and partying, musicians playing on the streets for tips, lamps glowing, neon colors splashed everywhere, the smell of flowers and grass and oh, feck me, the glorious scent of bangers and mash and thick Irish stew and all kinds of food I haven’t had in ages! I’d been quick enough to zip in and snatch anything I wanted from any plate. It was the most exciting, wondrous place I ever been, with adventures around every corner.

Knowing Mac was just a few blocks down and over, and if I blew in the door we’d go kill things and hang, made life pretty much perfect. Barrons Books & Baubles was my mecca, Mac and Barrons epic fellow

crusaders, and the city a thrill--a--second battlefield.

I want my Dublin back.

I want this bloody ice gone.

I want the pubs open and the streets shiny with gaslights smudging the cobblestones and people living and laughing everywhere I turn. I want to whiz around on my bike, investigating stuff, and be fourteen and crack up with Dancer and idolize the girl that treated me like a sister.

People in Hell want ice water.

As I stand there a sec, getting broody--like, I feel the tip of something sharp and pointy in my back.

"Drop your sword, Dani," Mac says behind me.

My stomach cramps and I'm instantly sick to it. What the feck, did I conjure her with the mere power of my thoughts? Do I have another sidhe--seer talent I didn't know about, latent until now? Cripes, I hope not! I'll never get away from Ryodan! I'm always pissed at him, which means I'm always thinking about him. As soon as I think that, I realize I got concrete proof I don't have a new superpower, because, hey, if I did, he'd be here with me right now. I decide I'm hallucinating from lack of sleep and being forced to listen to too much Jimi Hendrix and Black Sabbath tonight. Which is, like, half a song of either.

There's no way Mac's behind me. I'd have heard her. I have superhearing. I'd have seen the lights of her MacHalo, brightening the glow cast by mine.

"Yeah, right, like I'm actually falling for this," I mutter. Sometimes I have an overactive imagination.

The tip digs harder into my back. I go still and draw a slow inhale. I know Mac's scent and that's it. A dry chittering starts on the rooftops, swelling into thousands of rattlesnake tails shaking, making me even more nauseated. I don't need to look to know what's up there. Oh, yeah, Mac is really behind me, bizarre entourage in tow. The few times I've seen her lately, she's had a flock of Unseelie ZEWs—Zombie Eating Wraiths is what I christened the gaunt, black--robed caste that glides on air and likes roosting on top of the bookstore—following her around like enormous, carrion crow waiting for a juicy corpse to pick clean.

Ain't gonna be mine.

I dig out a protein bar, rip it open, and cram it in my mouth for an instant rush of energy. I never avoid battle. Tuck tail and run isn't in my blood. Problem is, I only know two ways to fight: kill clean or kill messy—both of which involve killing unless I'm up against that feck Ryodan who can pluck me from hyperspeed and kick my ass ten ways to Tuesday.

There's no way I'm killing Mac. I'll take Door Number Two, a thing I never do, and run. Only for her.

I slap up a hasty mental map of the street and get my grid locked down as perfect as I can with all this snow and ice. I slit my eyes half closed in intense concentration and freeze--frame.

Nothing happens. My feet are rooted in the exact same spot, and I'm still feeling the tip of Mac's spear in my back.

My superpowers just disappeared in a moment of need for the third time. Un--fecking--real! What's the commonality? Why does it keep happening?

"I said drop your fucking sword."

I exhale gustily. Not because I feel sorry for myself. Self--pity is wasted emotion. It merely prolongs whatever trauma you suffered by keeping it alive in your head. Dude, you survived it. Move on.

But there are some things I wish had been different like, say, Ro had never taken me to the abbey after Mom died, made me her personal assassin and taught me to kill before I got around to figuring out what I thought was right and wrong, because when you do figure out what you think is right and wrong—if it's foursquare against the things you been doing—you got some tricky minefields in your head to dodge. Guilt, regret—things I almost don't even know how to spell they're so alien to me—I about drown in them every time I look at Mac.

Fortunately she's behind me at the moment, so I don't have to think about how she looks so much like her sister, don't get smashed upside the head by visuals of the last night I saw Alina, on her hands and knees in an alley, begging me not to let her die.

"Seriously, kid, drop it. I won't say it again."

“Not a kid. Dude.”

“Danielle.”

Gah! She knows I hate that wussy girl name! I test my freeze--framing abilities. They're still absent. There's no telling how long it'll be until they come back. Five seconds. Five minutes. Maybe five hours. I got no clue why it's happening and it's beginning to worry the crap out of me. I turn to face her, coat back, hand on the hilt of my sword, steeling myself for a whole--body flinch, and still I jerk.

She's different from the Mac I met a year ago. Glam girl turned sleek warrior woman. She was pretty when she came to Dublin; now she's lean, strong, and beautiful. Once, she said I was pretty and that I'd grow up to be beautiful, too, one day. As if I give a rat's arse about that kind of thing.

What is she thinking, pulling her spear on me, ordering me around? There's no way she knows I'm stuck in slow--mo. No one knows it happens to me. Cripes, if word of that got out!

She stares at me, green eyes narrowed with fury. She has every right to try to kill me. A better person might even cooperate a little out of guilt and remorse. I'm not a better person. I wake up every day with a single imperative: live. By any means necessary. The only way Death will ever get his slimy bastard hands on me is over my dead body.

I wonder if she has some new sidhe--seer skill I haven't heard about that makes her willing to hit me up like this, so cool and confident. My superspeed guarantees my victory in any battle against another sidhe--seer unless I make a mistake, and I don't. She isn't wearing a MacHalo, which perplexes the feck out of me. Nobody walks Dublin, dark. Not even me. Maybe the ZEWs on the rooftops are her private army now, defending her against the Shades and assorted nasties.

I frown when another thought occurs to me. Did she set me up for quid pro quo down to the dirty details? Dark alley nearby—check.

Me—check.

Hungry Unseelie—check.

I get a mental snapshot of me dying just like Alina. It's practically glowing on Mac's pupils.

I want to tell her revenge is a devil you don't want to worship. In destroying your enemy you become it.

You will take the girl to an alley on the south side of the River Liffey. Unseelie will meet you there.

Sometimes I still hear Ro's voice in my head even though we burned her body and dumped the ashes in the sea. Not like a true haunt, just ghosts of memories still swimming down deep in my subconscious where I keep most of what I did for her when I lived at the abbey.

Why? I want to ask her, but she touches my forehead with something that's wet and smells bad, and mutters words I don't know, then I can't talk.

I know you're in there, I hear Ro saying, as if from a great distance. Remember the hell you endured. You're the one I want.

I don't know what she's talking about. I'm right there. Looking at her. Even though it feels like from a million miles away.

Och, child, she says, I couldn't have raised you better myself to fragment you into usable pieces. When I found you when you were five I knew God had forged the beginning of a very special weapon. Just for me. Old bat couldn't even keep track of my age. I was eight when she found me almost dead in a cage. Only time in my life I ever waited to die. Counting my breaths. Wondering which would be the last. There was a whole week back there I couldn't remember, just gone. From the day Ro took me in, I began losing hours and then I'd be somewhere else and wouldn't know how I'd gotten there. And there was usually something I didn't like seeing. Other times I was seeing it all happen except not in control, stuck in the sidecar of the motorcycle, where I couldn't steer or hit the gas. There was never a brake when things got weird like that. I was always just along for the ride, glued to the seat. Like the night I killed Mac's sister. Second worst thing I ever did and I relive it in nightmares, down to the last excruciating detail. Sometimes I wondered if the crazy old bat had been able to choose to let me see the things she sent me to do, or shield me from them.

If I dwelled on that thought I'd go nuts. Hate eats the hater. Ro messed with me enough while she was alive. She's dead now, and if I let her keep fecking with me, it'll be my own fault and she'll win. Even from her

watery grave, she could steal hours, days, weeks of my life. Sometimes when really bad things happen, you put them in a box and never look at them again because they'll cost you the rest of your life. Some wounds never heal. You excise the savaged flesh and become the next thing.

"Drop your sword and I'll put down my spear," Mac says.

"Yeah, right. Then what? You order your creepy little army of Unseelie to drag me down that alley and eat me? No, let me guess: We head back to BB&B, make hot chocolate, hang out and talk?"

"That's the general idea. Minus the bookstore and hot chocolate. And they're not my creepy little army."

"Like, talk about what? Me killing your sister? And they sure look like your creepy little army to me. Go everywhere you do." Feck, it's good to see her. I missed seeing her. I was always scanning every room, every street, hoping to see her. Dreading it.

She flinches. "Maybe you could try not to say it that way. And I said they're not."

"Why shouldn't I? It's what happened," I say defiantly. Fecking pointless. She's never going to see it any other way. My fingers tighten on my sword. "I killed your sister. There it is. Fact. Dude. Never gonna change. I. Killed. Alina. You came to Dublin hunting her murderer. Here I am." I raise a hand and wave it around just in case she's missing the point, overlooking me somehow.

"Dani, I know you're—"

"You don't know nothing about me!" I cut her off hard and fast. I hate sentences that begin with my name followed by the claim—indubitably erroneous—that the speaker knows something about me. Those kinds of sentences rank right up there with the ones that begin with You know what your problem is? That's always a doozy. Talk about a trick question. Nothing worth hearing ever follows that preface. I snarl, "You hear me? I said you don't know nothing! Now get the feck out of my way and take your creepy little groupies with you!"

"No. This ends. Here. Tonight. And I said. They're. Not. Mine." She cuts a look up and mutters, "They stalk me. I haven't figured out how to get rid of them. Yet."

Instantly I want to be on the Dublin News--Channel--X investigative team, ask probing questions, get immersed in solving a thrilling mystery with Mac, but those days are gone and about as likely to come back as dinosaurs. I look at her, and she's giving me this totally fake I'm--not--going--to--kill--you look that's supposed to lure me close enough to get killed. But her fingers sure are tight on the hilt of her spear. And she's balanced real light on the balls of her feet like I am. I know that stance. It's preattack. Face says one thing. Body says another. I listen to the body. Keeps me alive.

She's wearing boots with low heels, fashionable, stupid shoes for ice. It doesn't matter how new and improved Mac-Kayla Lane is, part of her will always be as pink and girly as the nails on the hilt of her spear. I'm wearing sneakers.

Even slow--mo I'm faster than she'll ever be in those boots. There's no way Mac'll throw her spear at me. No more than she would put it down in a show of good faith. She's like me with my sword. We don't let them out of our hands. Not willingly. Well, I did it tonight for a Highlander who's mostly Unseelie Prince but I got no fucking clue why. The only unknown are those ghastly Unseelie on the rooftops—are they or aren't they here to kill me?

One way to find out.

I try to freeze--frame but don't even get a chug--a--chug of the engine, my battery's deader than dead. Feels like it's not even in the car anymore. Got cables leading nowhere.

I lunge for her and shove her off balance.

She grabs at me but I duck under her arm and push past her. When she snatches a handful of my coat from behind, I turn my head and bite her hand. Not swing my sword or blow something up. Bite. Like a child that doesn't have any other weapons.

"Ow! You bit me!"

"Wow, gee. See Mac's brilliant skills of observation," I say irritably. What am I going to do next—pull her hair? Then she might slap me and break a nail and we'll call each other names. The sheer humiliating wussiness of this might goad me into drawing my sword and killing her. I can't fathom how normal folks

stand this. Above us, the wraithlike ZEWs chitter louder but stay put. “Get off me, stupid,” I hiss. I try to yank free, but she’s stronger than I remember.

The second I tug my coat from her fingers she grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls.

“Ow! You pulled my hair!” It hurt. Give me swords and spears and guns any day of the week.

“Wow, gee. See Dani’s brilliant skills—”

“Stow it! Think up your own insults, unless it’s too much work for your—”

“—of observation. And I did not pull your hair. I’m just trying to hold you. You’re trying to get away.

You’re the one pulling your hair.”

“—puny little brain! And of course I’m trying to get away, you fucking twit! And I’m not biting you now so let go of my hair!” I reach up, grab my hair, and we do this idiotic tug of war, then she lets go so abruptly, I crash forward onto my hands and knees.

I surge up instantly but duck again and roll fast out of the way twice, three times, when I hear the whine of her spear behind me. The ZEWs explode upward, rustling and shrieking like a flock of startled buzzards.

Guess the spear slicing air freaks them out, too.

For a stupid, vulnerable instant I crouch near the ground and can’t even move, trying to process that Mac really just swung her spear at me, made an undeniable attempt to kill me, as in remove me from this planet, as in end me forever. Seems I was holding on to a crippling hope of absolution, secret even from me. The air feels colder behind me, as if a murderous rage looms there. If you think emotions don’t throw off energy, you’re wrong.

I shoot to my feet, scrubbing at my cheeks with the balls of my fists. Ice chips must’ve flown up into my eyes when I rolled, making them sting and tear.

I break into a run.

My backpack drops like a stone from my shoulders. Bugger, she missed me but she caught the straps of my bag as I ducked, and all my food is in my pack! I don’t know a single store in a fifty-mile radius with stock on the shelves. My superspeed will come back, and when it does I’ll need food ASAP. I skid to a slippery stop on ice and turn to grab it.

Mac is standing, one boot planted on my backpack, spear raised, shining alabaster. The edges are razor sharp. I can see my name written all over them.

Message is clear.

“You can’t go anywhere without food, Dani. Stop running. I just want to talk to you.”

“You’re not tricking me!” I hate it that she keeps pretending. Full frontal attack I can deal with. This sneaky crap is lower than low.

“I’m not trying to.”

She sure as feck is. She just tried to slice off my head, for cripes sake.

The ZEWs resettle on the rooftops and resume that nerve--wracking racket again.

“So, what? I’m supposed to believe you came looking for me to tell me you, like, forgive me? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

Her eyes fill with shadows and she looks sad. “Life is complicated, Dani.”

“What the feck does that mean?” I could just pop out of my skin like an overpressured grape from sheer frustration. I hate it when people throw big sweeping generalizations at you that you can’t even begin to interpret. Life is complicated so I’m going to kill you quick? Life is complicated so I’m going to torture you to death slow and talk the whole time, driving you batshit crazy in the process? Life is complicated ergo I might forgive you if you perform Herculean tasks of redemption? The options are endless. Who doesn’t know life is complicated? What I want to know is how to apply that to the nuts and bolts of my existence. Folks never tell you that part.

“Sometimes the things we think will set us free .??. only make more chains. You either wear them or break them, and I .??. well, I don’t want to wear them.”

“Dude, ain’t no chains here. I don’t see nothing but you and me and weapons and death, if you don’t get off my pack and walk away. Besides, even if you did say you forgive me, I’d never believe you! I’ll always be

waiting for the second you decide to try to kill me. You want me dead. Admit it. Just say it. Be honest, for feck's sake! You know you want me dead! I see it in your eyes!"

She doesn't say anything for a couple seconds, like she's thinking hard about what she's going to say next, and I don't even know I'm holding my breath waiting until she begins talking and it kind of explodes from my lungs.

"I don't want you dead, Dani. That's not why I came looking for you."

"Well, why the fuck not?" I yell. "I deserve to die!"

My hand goes to my mouth like maybe I can cover up what I just said or scrape the words back inside somehow. I'm horrified. I don't even know where those words came from. There aren't many sins in my bible. Giving up is the greatest one of all. I just broke my own cardinal rule. Life is a gift. You fight to keep it. You never quit. Never.

Nobody wants you. Your own mother locks you in a cage, leaves and forgets you. Just die. It'll end everyone's misery, including your own. Maybe then she can have a life. One of you should.

I can't believe I just said I deserve to die. Maybe I'm possessed. Maybe I got one of those sneaky, diaphanous Unseelie Grippers inside me but it's only fecking with me sometimes ('cause I'm so super it can't possess me all the time!), making me say things I don't really feel and shorting out my powers. And maybe that Gripper has some kind of bizarre obsession with Ryodan. Weirder things have been happening in Dublin lately.

Mac shakes her head, giving me a totally fake compassionate look. "Oh, Dani—"

"I'm not falling for this so just shut up! Leave me alone or I'll kill you like I killed your sister. I swear I will. I'll kill you and then I'll kill everybody you care about. That's what I do. I kill people. I kill and kill and kill. That's who I am. That's who she made me." I used to daydream Barrons found me in the cage that day, instead of Ro, and imagine what I'd have turned out to be then, but he didn't. She did. It is what it is.

I run.

She follows faster than I would have thought possible. I wonder if Barrons did something to her, maybe that thing Ryodan said he would do for me. Is she as unkillable as them now? Is that where her balls are coming from? If so, I'm seriously pissed and even more jealous.

I leap snowbanks, dash down alleys, double back around, leading her on a merry chase through Temple Bar, and still she manages to stay hot on my arse. I keep testing every couple of seconds to see if I can freeze--frame but my superpowers have taken the same vacation my conscience went on years ago.

She's yelling stuff but I don't listen. I hum my favorite playlist to tune out her and the racket of her creepy army.

I don't realize my feet have taken me to Barrons Books & Baubles until it looms up in front of me, only holy place I've ever known: amber lights and polished wood and diamond--paned windows and endless possibilities. Deep in a limestone arch, fancy columns and sidelights and brass sconces and a stained--glass transom frame the door I used to go banging through a million miles a minute, and just above it on a shiny brass pole hangs that colorful hand--painted shingle that might as well have once said Welcome Home but never would again for me.

I love this place more than any other. Gas fireplaces and big comfy couches you can really stretch out on and magazines and books you can read and dream about all the places in the world you're gonna see one day, and wicked--cool antique weapons and kick-ass modern ones, and killer muscle cars and cakes and presents and friends you thought you had. The hours I spent there are filed away in my storage vaults in superhigh-gloss Technicolor, brighter than any other memories. Sometimes I pull one out and relive it real slow, savoring it down to the last morsel. I love Mac. I miss her so bad. I wish—

Wishes aren't horses and I don't get to ride. 'Scool. I got feet that are usually superhero grade.

The bell on the door tinkles.

A man steps out.

Strong. Brilliant. Controlled.

Predator.

Unbreakable. Feck, to be so unbreakable!

He's everything I admire plus things I can't even begin to put into words.

I crush on Jericho Barrons violently.

My brain almost shuts down every time I see him and that's a lot of gray matter to stupefy.

Used to be, if I couldn't fall asleep I'd fantasize all kinds of ways I'd impress Barrons by killing monsters or saying something really smart or saving the world, and he'd see me as a grown--up woman and I'd glow just from the expression on his face, like that time I killed the Unseelie Prince in Mac's cell and he looked at me like he really saw who I was. Most folks don't. They fence me in with teenage rules that don't hold me for shit, seeing how I grew up. You can kill but don't cuss. Break any rule necessary to save the world but don't watch porn or even think about having sex. How do they come up with this stuff—hold parental powwows for brainstorming diametrically opposed ethics? Then Ryodan began popping into my Barrons fantasies like he had some kind of business being there

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