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“The penalty for summoning the dead back to earth is death; if the summoned spirit does not kill its summoner, be assured the Church will.”

--The Book of Truth, Laws, Article 3

Chapter One

Ghosts were stronger underground; no witch willingly went below the surface of the earth, not without a Church edict or a death wish. Chess had both to varying degrees, but that didn't make the doorway looming behind the skinny man holding the cup any more appealing. The doorway, and the stairs. Down into a basement, down into the ground.

Chess's skin crawled from more than just the squat-faced, wizened appearance of the man, more than the bizarre energy in the dirty shack. Something told her this was not going to end well.

But then, things so rarely did.

She could have busted the bastards simply for having a basement. The Church decreed they were illegal, and the Church was not to be disobeyed. But she needed more than that—a month of investigation *demand*ed a more satisfactory resolution than that—so instead she pasted what she hoped was a smile with the right touch of nervousness on her face and handed the skinny man the picture she'd brought with her, careful not to touch his grimy fingers.

The picture was of Gary Anderson, a fellow Debunker, but the skinny man didn't know that. At least, Chess hoped he didn't.

"My brother," she told him. It would have been better if she'd been able to squeeze out a tear, but the Cepts she'd taken didn't allow it. It was hard enough to feel anything when she was high, let alone anything intense enough to make her weep. Hell, that was one reason why she kept taking the fucking things, wasn't it?

The skinny man focused his rheumy eyes with effort on the photo, then nodded.

"Aye, seein a lookalike," he mumbled, scratching his bony chest through a hole in his ragged green sweater. He shoved the cup forward, narrowly avoiding hitting her with it. "You drink, aye?"

"Thanks, but—"

"Nay, nay, lil miss. You drink, or you ain't get down, aye? All must drink." His chapped lips stretched and flaked in a gruesome semblance of a smile, like a fat worm crawling across his face, revealing broken, graying teeth. "All must drink, or the energy, she ain't work."

Shit. Who the fuck knew what was in that nasty cup? Even if the "tea" was harmless—which she doubted—the thing looked like it hadn't

been washed since before Haunted Week. She could practically see germs crawling along the rim.

The bonus on this job would be a couple of grand, she reminded herself, and snatched the cup from his dry, bony hand.

His gaze locked on hers. She held it while she tilted the cup up and poured the contents down her throat.

For a second the room spun around her, whirling on its side like an amusement park ride. The concoction tasted of bitter herbs and glue, of seawater and sewage. It was the most revolting thing she'd ever put in her mouth, and that was saying a lot.

She held it down through sheer force of will, and was rewarded with another flaky smile. Something lurked behind that smile, but she didn't have time to analyze it. His hand was on her sleeve, urging her into the dark mouth of the stairway, and her feet clumped on the wooden slats as she made her way into the damp cave below.

The others were already there, sitting in a circle beneath flaming torches, around a scarred wooden table. Across one end of it draped a blue silk scarf, stained with blood or wine—or perhaps someone else's stomach had lost its battle with the tea.

No time to think about it, even if she'd cared enough to bother. Instead she made her way to the table, to the straight-backed wooden chair someone had pushed out for her.

"Someone", she saw, was a five-foot-tall human parody of indeterminate sex wearing a belted garbage bag and white face paint. Heavy black rims surrounded its beady, pupil-less eyes, and its voice was barely more than a dry whisper, like a knife cutting through cardboard.

“Sit ye down, lil miss,” it rasped. “Sit ye down, and the Ladywitch, she’ll be out.”

“The Ladywitch” was Madame Lupita, formerly known as Irene Lowe, and as soon as Chess had the evidence she needed—in the form of her own eyewitness testimony and whatever the minirecorder concealed in her bra picked up—the Madame would have a date with a rope. The Church did not take a forgiving stance on illegal ghost-raising or séances, even fake ones such as Lupita was rumored to run.

Rumor, hell. What was about to happen here was obvious, was even more so when a black-painted door opened opposite Chess and an enormous woman thrust her bulk into the room.

Her face was white, her eyes black-rimmed, a garish parody of Church Elder make-up. Any resemblance stopped there; Madame Lupita wore a shiny silver caftan, on which was painted various runes and magical symbols. Small pieces of iron hung from it, too small to offer any real protection. Chess supposed they were there for the effect, as was the heavy iron-and-amber necklace around the woman’s short, fat throat or the matching silver turban covering her head.

Whatever they were for, Lupita’s appearance was obviously what the other people around the table expected. Chess felt rather than heard their sigh of satisfaction, their belief that they’d done the right thing in coming here. For those who couldn’t afford to pay a Church Liaiser to contact the spirits of their dead loved ones, amateur séances like these seemed the answer to the prayers they were prohibited from uttering.

Too bad they were illegal, which was why Chess was there to begin with; helping the Black Squad make a case against Lupita meant some extra cash for her.

And too bad it was all fake. If Lupita and her ilk were truly powerful enough to raise ghosts, the Church would have found them through the tests every child in the world underwent at the age of fourteen, trained them, and hired them. Many of them had a glimmer of power, enough to send a shiver through the air and fool their clients, most of whom had no idea what real power, real magic felt like.

Chess did. Knew the feeling—loved the feeling—almost as much as the cool smooth peace of her pills, or the foggy bliss of Dream smoke, or the sparkly, fizzing sensation created by the occasional line of speed. She knew them all, and loved them all, because anything that distanced her from reality was a blessing in a world where blessing was against the law.

Of course, her drugs were illegal too. But that hadn't stopped her from doing them, hadn't stopped her dealer Bump—or her whatever-he-was, Lex—from selling them. It just meant they all had to be a lot more careful.

Speaking of careful... Madame Lupita settled herself at the table, clapped her hands. Something clinked behind Chess. She didn't turn around, but she heard it, soft wings beating the air. A psychopomp. Madame Lupita knew how to put on a show.

“All hold hands,” she commanded, in a deep, liquid voice. “No messin, aye...hold hands, or they don't come.”

To Chess's left sat a rake-thin young man. His fingers were sweaty, his face wet with tears as he stared at the picture on the table before him. Chess couldn't make out the image.

To her right was the female half of a middle-aged couple, clad in a cheap fake silk dress. Her hand shook against Chess's palm.

Lupita reached across the table and grabbed the picture in front of the woman. "What be this girl's name?"

"A-Annabeth. Annabeth Whitman."

Lupita bowed her head. The others did the same, including Chess, who used the opportunity to look around the room from under her lashes.

The psychopomp settled on a perch behind Lupita's left shoulder. A crow, its black feathers gleaming in the firelight. To Chess's right, against the wall, row upon row of skulls grinned blankly at her. Most were small animals, cats and rats and the occasional dog. To her left a wall mural; spirits straining for the sky, their long arms and spidery fingers gruesome and sad.

Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down the side of her face. Had it been that hot in there a few minutes before? No one else seemed to be sweating, why was she?

Of course, no one else was wearing a high-necked, long-sleeved sweater, either, despite the cold outside. Chess had no choice; every inch of her arms and chest were decorated with the tattoos marking her as a Church employee, magical symbols that focused her power, warned her, protected her. They tingled now, but whether it was from the heat or her own nerves or the tremors in the atmosphere Chess didn't know. It was

nothing serious. She'd been right. Lupita didn't have anywhere near the kind of power required to raise a ghost.

Good thing, too, as she hadn't even bothered to mark her "guests" with basic protective sigils or circle the floor with salt or anything else Church employees learned in their first year of training.

Chess wondered what they might see. Holograms, probably; their technology had advanced to the point where it was difficult to impossible to tell the difference between a real ghost and a fake one—at least if you didn't have any natural abilities in that direction—and if Lupita brought in this kind of money on a regular basis she could probably afford the top-of-the-line.

Or it could be some of the old-fashioned tricks, the kind used by charlatans long before Haunted Week. Dim lighting, that bizarre and disgusting tea which was probably mildly hallucinogenic; the power of suggestion. Mirrors and shimmery fabric and the customer's own desperate need to believe would take care of the rest.

At least it was safe. A real ghost—a real ghost was something to inspire nightmares. A real ghost, outside of Church control, wasn't going to have a nice little chat with its Mommy or beloved friend. A real ghost was going to have one thing on what remained of its mind, and one thing only; to kill. To steal the energy of everyone it came near, to use their life-forces to make itself stronger, a parasite which would grow fat on the blood of its victims.

Not one of the people in that room had any fucking idea what it meant to face a real ghost. Lucky for them, they weren't going to find out,

either. As soon as Lupita got her little show on the road they could shut her down, and the closest they'd get to a ghost was that hideous mural.

Orange light flashed off silver. Chess looked up along with everyone else, and her already nervous heartbeat kicked into high gear. Lupita held a knife, high over her own exposed forearm. Blood magic. Oh, that was not good. Blood magic, with no circle, no words of protection, Lupita might be powerless but this was—

The knife descended. Lupita's blood spilled out, over her tattoos—so like Chess's, but illegal, another crime to add to the growing list, as if Lupita needed anything more to damn her—onto the silk tablecloth.

“*Kadira tam*, Annabeth Whitman,” intoned Madame Lupita.
“*Kadira tam.*”

A drop of sweat landed on the table in front of Chess. Her breath rasped in her throat. Shit, she really felt sick. Weak. Exposed, somehow, like all her psychic shielding was failing and her power fought to escape.

Escape...as Lupita pushed with her own weak power. As she leeches from all of them. Chess felt it, like she was a battery being drained, and in that second, just as the temperature in the room dropped about twenty degrees, she knew something was very, very wrong.

No, Lupita didn't have the power to raise a ghost. But Chess did, and Lupita was pulling it from her. Somehow the woman was reaching into her, *through* her, sucking out Chess's strength and focusing it—focusing it on her spell, fuck—

Chess fought, threw as much energy as she could to her shields, but she felt like a child struggling to play tug-of-war against a giant. She

couldn't think, her energy was draining away and she couldn't...couldn't hold on to it...her stomach roiled, her eyelids fluttered.

The crow flapped its wings, danced on the perch for a minute, then took flight. It circled the room, faster and faster. Chess's skin crawled and stung, her tattoos screaming the warning her mouth couldn't seem to form...

Lupita's deep chant turned into a screech. Through a bleary haze Chess saw the woman heave herself from her chair, her black-ringed eyes widening in terror. Staring...staring at the pale haze taking shape in the corner.

The haze of Annabeth Whitman.

Chess gritted her teeth so hard she thought they might crack and yanked her hand away from Annabeth's mother. The microrecorder had an emergency button, in case her fellow Church employees weren't already on the way. She had to get out of there, had to have help. Whatever was wrong with her was too much, too bad, for her to hope to defeat the ghost and if someone didn't do it soon Annabeth would kill every person in the room.

She found the button, pressed it. And kept pressing it as the pale column grew, as a head appeared. Long tendrils of white formed arms; the shape solidified, growing more detailed with every beat of Chess's panic-stricken heart. She'd lost count of the number of ghosts she'd seen, but the fear never left, never lessened. A ghost—one like this, free of its underground prison, free from Church safeguards and protocols—was a loaded gun, a sword in the hand of a lunatic.

And Chess and everyone else in this flaming pit of hell were the first who'd feel the weapon's rage.

The others didn't seem to understand something was wrong; Mrs. Whitman was standing, holding her hands out in supplication.

"Annabeth...my baby...we missed you, we wanted to—"

Annabeth's features had formed now, translucent but perfect. She'd been a beautiful girl. Long pale hair hung down her shoulders; the vague outline of her body beneath her gown was petite, sweetly curved.

Her eyes widened. Chess held her breath for one heart-stopping, hopeful moment. They weren't always vicious, not always. Only ninety-nine percent of the time... There was a chance Annabeth would—

No chance. Those innocent eyes narrowed; the perfect lips pulled back in a snarl. Chess barely had time to open her mouth before Annabeth dove for the bloody knife on the table.

In her bag Chess had graveyard dirt and herbs. She couldn't do a full ritual, didn't think she'd have the power to do one even if she had the equipment, but she could freeze Annabeth, stop her from harming anyone.

Her fingers still worked. She tore at the tab of her zipper, yanked it open. Keeping her eyes on Annabeth, she shoved her hand into the bag, past her pillbox and compass and tissues and cash and wipes and all the other crap, to find her supplies at the bottom.

Mama Lupita screamed and tried to run, but her weight and flair for the dramatic caught her. She tripped over something—Chess assumed it was the heavy folds of her ridiculous robe—and fell with a thud.

Sweat ran into Chess's eyes. Acid bubbled in her stomach, leapt

into her throat. Shit, she was going to be sick, her gut felt like somebody had shoved in a knife and twisted. This wasn't normal, magic—especially not her own magic—shouldn't make her feel this way, she was—*what was in that tea? What the fuck was in that tea?*

The assistant, the little one, cackled in the corner. “Feeling awry, Churchwitch? Feelin sick?”

Oh, no. They knew who she was—knew what she was. Had known when she walked in the door.

Annabeth lunged for her mother. Chess threw a handful of graveyard dirt, tried to put some power behind it as she forced words out of her gummy throat. “Annabeth Whitman, I command you to be still. By the power of the earth which binds you I command it.”

Annabeth faltered, but kept moving. Not enough power. Shit!

A loud bang, the clattering of footsteps on the steps. Reinforcements, oh thank the technology that brought them here, they'd arrived.

Chess spun away from Annabeth. The others would take care of her. Instead Chess dove for the bizarre figure in the garbage bag, straining to focus. The handle of her knife felt cool, solid in her hand, better than almost anything else could.

Up close Chess realized it was a woman behind the make-up. She the tangle of hair on her head, held the knife at her throat. “What was in the tea?”

The woman giggled. The acrid, silvery odor of speed sweat assaulted Chess's nose. Just what she needed. A fucking Niphead lunatic holding her life in her filthy hand.

“What was in the fucking tea? You don’t want to die right now, you’ll—”

“You ain’t kill me, Churchwitch. Ain’t got it in you.”

Chess pushed the knife further up, so it dug into the woman’s throat, and focused. She’d killed before. She hadn’t wanted to do it and she hadn’t liked doing it, but she had. And better yet, she knew people who did it without batting an eye, knew people who’d done worse—hell, if she went back far enough she knew people who’d done worse to *her*. People who made hate rise boiling and putrid in her chest. She thought of them, let those memories wash over her and crystallize in her head, become something solid and hard.

Behind her all was chaos. The Church employees shouted. The scent of banishing herbs rose thick and dry. Chess ignored it all and stared at the woman at the point of her knife. She stared, and she believed, deep down, that she would drive the knife up, and she let the woman see that belief.

It worked. “Tasro.” The woman looked down. “Were tasro.”

Poison. Tasro was poison. Chess’s head swam.

“Chessie? You okay?”

Dana Wright, another Debunker. Her eyes were wide with concern, her hands still full of herbs.

“Tasro. They put tasro in my drink, they knew me before I even got down the stairs. Is the kit in the van?”

“I’ll go with you.” Dana reached for her, but Chess ducked away. She didn’t want to be touched. Didn’t think she could stand it.

“No, just—take this one, okay? I’ve—I’ve got to—”

She didn't bother to finish. It felt like she'd swallowed a razor blade and she didn't have much time. Not to mention the tiny prick of uncertainty, of worry. The antidote shouldn't react with her pills, but...better to be alone. Just in case.

"You're not supposed to self-administer—"

"I'm fine."

Dana looked like she wanted to say more, but Chess didn't stick around to listen. She ran up the stairs, out the door, and let the icy wind dry the sweat on her forehead.

The Morton case three months before had irrevocably changed her position in the Church. Not just her job itself—in addition to Debunking she now worked occasionally with other departments, which was how she'd gotten to be point man in tonight's deadly party—but in the eyes of those she worked with. Half of them looked at her like she was the great Betrayer and the other half seemed to think she was some sort of fucking genius for banishing Ereshdiran the dreamthief—*after* he'd killed Randy Duncan, another Debunker. That Randy had summoned the entity in the first place made a difference only to some.

Chess didn't give a shit either way. The only thing she cared about was that the anonymity she'd once prized had disappeared, and now she felt eyes on her everywhere she went. Which sucked. Who knew what they might see, if they paid attention? Church employees were not supposed to be addicts.

Her skeleton key opened the van's backdoor and she yanked it open with a bit more force than was necessary. Somewhere in the back was a first aid kit with a variety of antidotes in addition to basic remedies

like bandages and antibiotic ointment.

She climbed in, leaving the door open so more cold wind could blast her. It wasn't just the air of the shack that had made her warm, wasn't just the poison either. She'd taken an extra Cept before entering the building, not knowing how long the ritual and resulting paperwork would take and not wanting to be caught out if it took too long. If she sat still and focused she'd be able to feel the high, but there wasn't time. Not unless she wanted it to be the last high she ever felt, which she didn't.

The kit was hidden beneath the back bench seat. Chess dug it out and opened it. Fuck. Somewhere in the back of her mind she'd hoped the antidotes weren't kept in syringes anymore. So much for hope..

The needle was cold, too. Great.

Voices rode the wind into the van. She had no idea how far away the others were, but she preferred to have this done with before they returned. Nobody would think twice about it, not after Dana told them what had happened. But that didn't make the thought of being found in the back of the van with a spike in her vein any more pleasant. Too close to the truth, perhaps, the undeniable fact that she was only a short jump away from that fucking needle turning into a vital part of her life, that only fear and willpower had kept her from it so far.

The rubber catheter was stiff, not wanting to be tied. Chess could relate. She didn't want to tie it. Fear curled in her stomach and sat there like a lump of half-rotten Downside meat. She tied off, clenching her fist to pop a vein, slapping the crook of her arm. Something she'd sworn to herself she'd never do. That she was doing it to save her life—doing it with Church sanction, the way they'd been taught to do—didn't seem to count,

not when she'd seen this moment coming, dreaded this moment, almost every time she opened her pillbox.

She shook her head. This was ridiculous. Everything was under control, *she* was under control, now more than ever. She didn't owe anyone any money, she had plenty of pills, she *maintained*. A happy medium.

One quick stab, that was all it would take. She could do that, it would be easy. She'd barely feel it, right?

Not right. The freezing needle buried itself in her vein, and when she shoved the plunger down cold shot up her arm like a crack in ice. Tears stung the corners of her eyes and she turned her face away while she yanked the catheter off, not wanting to watch the syringe bob in time with her pulse while she fumbled in the kit for a cotton ball.

It only took a few seconds for the antidote to warm up. Another few to find the cotton and press it into place after she withdrew the needle. It was over. She'd done it, and it hadn't been so bad.

That was the scariest thing of all.

“Never fear to call the Church if you have any questions, or stumble upon signs of magic which frighten you. The Church’s job is to protect humanity from such things.”

--*The Church and You*, a pamphlet by Elder Barrett

Chapter Two

Madame Lupita’s curses and screams as she was dragged into the Church van still echoed in Chess’s head when she walked into Trickster’s Bar a few hours later. It was early by Downside time, not quite one. The Rolling Ghosts were playing and she wanted to catch the tail end if she could. At least that would chase the memories and sounds away.

And at least it was warm, in the sweaty stifling way of bars. Her earlier sensation of being overheated had vanished by the time she finished giving her report at the Church and headed back home to Downside. Even if it hadn’t, the drafts from the stained-glass window that made up one entire wall of her apartment and the lazy water heater that turned showers in winter into a gamble would have finished it.

Thanks to the Dreamthief case, she got most of her drugs for free—not through her regular dealer, Bump, but through Lex, who worked for Bump’s chief rival, Slobag. She didn’t know what exactly Lex did for Slobag. Not only had she never bothered to ask, she doubted if he would tell her if she did. Their relationship, such as it was, worked a lot better

when they kept their mouths busy elsewhere, but the fact remained that since she didn't pay for most of her drugs she could have afforded to move.

Could have, and probably should have. Somehow despite having more money in theory, it didn't quite work out that way in reality. Instead of more money she ended up with more drugs. Something told her that was probably not healthy. Something else in her didn't give a shit. And the rest of her was realistic enough to know it didn't matter.

Lex was fun. She liked him, and he gave her what she wanted in more ways than one. But dependable he was not—maybe she wouldn't have liked him as much if he had been—and she couldn't count on free drugs forever. Sooner or later she'd need to supply herself again, and living cheap was the only way to keep up.

Besides, Downside was her home, and there weren't many better places available. At least her building—a converted Catholic Church, one of the few that hadn't been destroyed when Haunted Week ended twenty-four years before—was quiet. Even the hookers on the corner kept it down most of the time, which was more than could be said for most of the neighborhood.

The bouncer stepped aside for her, admitting her into the dark red interior of the bar. The Rolling Ghosts hadn't gone on yet. Instead the Clash blared out of the speakers, loud enough to turn the talking heads in the room into ghosts themselves, silent but trying to overcome it.

She didn't want to think about ghosts. She held up a finger at the bartender, and gripped the beer he handed her in fingers finally starting to lose their stiffness.

Terrible stood in his usual spot near the back. She headed for him, watching the red lights play off his shiny black hair and illuminate the breathtaking ugliness of his profile. She didn't notice it anymore, not really; even now her eyes simply slid over it. He was Terrible, that was all. He was her friend...sort of.

But she knew it was what everyone else saw. The heavy, jutting brow, the crooked nose that looked as though the bones were trying to break out through the skin, the scars, the jaw like the prow of a ship. They saw the thick muttonchop sideburns, the impenetrable darkness of his eyes, and backed away. A face like that was a walking advertisement that the man behind it didn't give a fuck, and a man who didn't give a fuck was a very scary man indeed, especially considering he made his living as Bump's chief enforcer, especially considering his size. Someone catching sight of him expected the shoulders to end before they did, expected the chest to be less broad. They weren't.

Chess watched him lurking back there for a few more seconds before he caught sight of her. His chin lifted in a greeting, but he made no other move. Something bothering him, then, and no way to ask. They'd tried to have a deep conversation in a crowded bar once before. It hadn't ended well. Chess tried not to think about it.

"Hey Chess," he said. She got the words not just from his voice, barely a rumbling murmur over "Garageland", but from watching his lips move. "Figured you ain't coming after all, getting so late. You right?"

"Yeah. Right up. The job went on longer than I expected."

"Lookin pale."

She shrugged and drank her beer. No point discussing it, not when

they could barely hear each other. “When are they going on?”

“Few minutes, maybe. Not long. They—hold on.” From his pocket he produced a small black phone and flipped it open. The stark white glow of the screen invaded the darkness of the corner and highlighted his furrowed brow. “Fuck.”

“What’s—”

He cut her off with a look, a quick jerk of the head to indicate she should follow. This she did, trying to stay in his wake as he cut through the crowd back to the front of the room, narrowly avoiding razoring her cheek on some guy’s liberty spikes, and out the front doors.

Desultory clumps of people huddled outside, braving the cold to get a free listen once the band started playing. They shuffled out of the way when Terrible headed for the side of the building. Chess followed. For a second the cold soothed her heated skin before it became too much and she shivered. She should have brought a jacket, but they were such pains in the ass to hold on to in a club.

“Got problems.” He didn’t look at her as he dialed the phone and lifted it to his ear. “You know Red Berta, aye?”

“I know who she is.” Red Berta handled most of Bump’s girls—which meant she handled all of the Downside prostitutes west of Forty-third.

“Aye, well—Hey. Aye.” Whoever he’d called must have answered. “Aye, she—when they find it? Shit. Aye, hang on. I’ll be there.”

She knew before he snapped the phone shut that he wanted her to go with him. What she didn’t know was why.

“What’s going on?”

He stood for a moment with his eyes narrowed, sliding the phone back into his pocket without paying attention while he worked out whatever it was he needed to work out. “Feel like riding with me?”

“What’s going on?”

“Dead body.” His other hand went into his pocket. The movement made his shoulders look even broader, but the threat of his size had never been less evident. “One of Bump’s girls. Third one they find.”

“Somebody’s killing hookers?”

He shrugged. “Looking like a ghost doing the killing. Wouldn’t ask otherwise.”

“What, just in the streets?”

“Ain’t you cold? Whyn’t you come on, Chess. Warmer in the car, aye? Just take a look.” His head turned back toward the huddled crowd. Right. Probably not a good idea to discuss this in public. So she nodded, and followed him across the street while the music kept playing inside the bar.

Terrible’s ’69 BT Chevelle straddled the curb two doors down, making the streetlight look like it was set up just to display it. New black paint gleamed in the orangeish glare. Chess was almost afraid to touch it, the way she would be afraid to approach any predator. The car seemed ready to leap forward on its fat black tires at any moment and start swallowing the road.

Sitting on the leather seat was like sitting on a block of ice, but Chess didn’t mention it. He didn’t seem in the mood for jokes. Instead she waited for him to talk, knowing he’d get to it in his own time.

They’d gone about ten blocks through the abandoned streets west

of Downside's red-light district before he did.

"First hooker," he said. "But the third body, dig? Bump ain't paid much attention before, outside getting pissed. Dealer first. Slick Michigan, know him?"

She shook her head. The heater was starting to work; she could have relaxed if it weren't for her nerves. The last thing she wanted to do was get involved with a murderous ghost. Another murderous ghost, that was—she still hadn't fully recovered from the Dreamthief.

Terrible kept talking while she grabbed her pillbox and popped a couple of Cepts, washing them down with the beer she still held. "Found him maybe five weeks ago, down by the docks. Nobody think much of it. You know how them docks get. And Slick weren't exactly the calm type. Figure he gets into a fight, aye? Plays with some boy got a quick knife hand."

"He was knifed?"

"Aye."

"But then—"

He glanced at her. "Second one came a couple weeks ago, guessing. Little Tag. He a runner, aye? Ain't sell, ain't handle much. Just carryin from one place to another. Found him in an alley off Brewster."

"I didn't even know there were alleys off Brewster." She looked out the window. They'd gone south first, down to Mather. Now Terrible swung the big car left against the light. What was a hooker doing this far off the drag, and this close to the end of Bump's territory?

"Aye. Ain't much good in them places, neither. Nobody even sure how long he was there. He body...ain't pretty, if you dig. Hardly any left."

He took a long pull off his own beer and set it back down between his thighs, then pulled two cigarettes from his pocket and lit them.

Chess took the one he offered her and leaned back in her seat, letting the smoke curl out of her mouth and up toward the roof. “And now a girl.”

“Aye.”

“You still haven’t told me why you think it’s a ghost.”

“Ain’t sure it’s a ghost. Not me, not Bump. Got others thinking so, though.”

“So you want me to come in and say it isn’t?”

“Be a help, aye.”

“But what if it is?”

He glanced at her as he pulled the car up by a burned-out building. “You think be a ghost, Bump gonna call the Church ask them take care of it? Or you think he come to you?”

Shit.

* * *

His jacket practically swallowed her when she slipped it on. She shrugged it off and handed it back. Best not to look like a little girl. Probably best not to show up wearing his clothes either. Their casual friendship already sparked enough rumors—although those probably wouldn’t have been as fierce as they were if she hadn’t lost her head and let half of Downside see her practically fucking him in a bar three months before. She shrugged the memory off too, tried to focus on what was in front of her instead of what was behind.

Fires in steel trash cans added a little heat to the air, and

compensated by casting eerie shadows against the blank, broken walls along the street. Forty-fifth was practically no mans land this far down, a street constantly under siege from Slobag's men as they struggled to gain more territory. Here and there lights flickered in broken windows, indicating the presence of human inhabitants, but for the most part only shattered bottles and dirty needles called the street home.

Chess glanced to her left, across the street. A block away Slobag's buildings started. Ten or eleven blocks further north and a few east Lex lived. She shivered and had to force herself not to cross her arms over her chest. If she was going to suffer the cold in order to look tough, she needed to do it right.

The cold was abating a bit anyway as those last two Cepts worked their way into her system. Speaking of Lex. She'd need to go see him in the morning.

A tall woman with a mane of hair so bright red it glowed in the light strode away from the ragtag crowd and headed toward them. Her long legs were wrapped in wooly tights almost the same color, finished with knee-high thick orange striped socks that peeped from the toes of her red high-heeled sandals. She wore no skirt, only a thick green sweater, and over her shoulders hung a sleek black fur coat. On anyone else Chess would have thought it was rat, but this was Red Berta. It could have been sealskin from before Haunted Week, or just about anything else. She looked terrifying, like a doll dressed by a homicidal child.

"Terrible," she said, and beneath the brashness of her tone Chess heard her fear, felt it tingle. "Took you long enough."

He didn't reply, just pushed his way through the ring of people and

glanced back at Chess. She followed, her steps slowing against her will. A dead body was not what she had in mind when she'd gone out for a drink. A dead body, in fact, was never what she had in mind for anything, and feeling so many eyes on her did not make it easier.

Some watched with curiosity, some with hostility. Those she could ignore. It was the hope that drove a knife into her stomach and twisted. A few girls in short skirts, their pale legs the ashy pinkish-white that indicated the beginnings of hypothermia, huddled together and stared at her like she could wave a magic wand and bring their friend back to life. Very few people realized she really wasn't that powerful. Usually it made her life easier. Tonight it didn't.

Neither did the unmistakable evidence that at least a few of these girls were using some low-level sex magic. Not unusual for those in their profession, but not comfortable for Chess. Their energy licked over her skin, damp and insistent. Molesting her. Heating her blood against her will. The warmth was welcome; the reason for it was not. Neither were the memories it brought back. She never used sex magic.

Terrible caught her eye. His were shadowed, both from the absence of light and from something like sadness. Not good, then. She steeled herself and went to his side.

Empty eye sockets stared at the sky, ringed with blood. It was all Chess saw for a long minute, that dark space where life should be. Whoever had killed the girl hadn't just taken her eyes, he'd cut the flesh around them so bone peeped from the ragged edges. Chess closed her own eyes and set her feet more firmly on the cracked sidewalk. Not just because of the sight before her; that same invasive magic hung in the air

around the girl, stronger than with any of the others.

That didn't make sense. The girl was dead. Her spell should have died with her, instead of insinuating itself further into Chess's own energy, curling and spinning, tinged with throbbing darkness Chess didn't understand. Instead of running hot it felt cold, dank and oppressive. Like being shoved into a cave. She knelt by the girl's pale, motionless arm, hoping to steady her trembling legs.

The girl's age was indeterminate, in the way of most prostitutes. She could have been anywhere from fifteen to fifty; the slack, ruined skin of her face told Chess nothing.

Neither did her body. Beneath the blood already freezing into a crackled coating her limbs were slender, but it was rare in Downside to find people who managed to eat more than a few times a week. Almost everyone was slender, if not painfully so.

The only thing that stood out about the girl, save the obvious, horrible fact of her death, was the thick sex energy wrapping itself around Chess, sliding up her arm when she touched the girl's ice-hard flesh. It couldn't be hers, it couldn't belong to her. It had to be an aftereffect of her death. Part of the ritual, perhaps? Had they somehow used sex magic to kill her? The darkness hiding in that energy, smooth and secret as an intimate chuckle, indicated whatever it had been, it was not a regular sex spell.

"It be the Cryin Man," someone said helpfully. "He taken she eyes, so she ain't see him even in the City, aye?"

"Left his mark on her, too," another voice piped in, higher and younger with fear. "On her, and on yon wall."

Chess glanced up, finding the speaker's pointing finger and following it to the symbol scratched into the wall. Not a rune, as she'd originally feared. A glyph of some kind, like a gang sign. A triangle, decorated with upside-down arrows and crosses. It looked more like a bizarre doodle than something to inspire fear, but the hairs on the back of her neck stood up just the same.

Finding the symbol on the girl took a minute. Chess expected it would be carved into that too-pale skin, but it wasn't. Instead the mark covered her left breast, just below the plunging neckline of the girl's hot-pink top. Not cut in. Burned. And burned before she died, because blisters had started to raise on the wound.

"Did anybody hear anything?" She had to clear her throat to get the words out, busy herself with snapping a couple of quick pictures of the mark to keep from seeing the entire body, as if she could filter away the girl's lost humanity by viewing it through the lens.

"Cryin Man ain't let she scream," someone told her. "Nobody hear nothing."

"Was anyone with her?" Did it matter? Shit, how was she supposed to do this? Yes, Debunkers sometimes investigated witchcraft-related crimes, but only as they related to cases like Madame Lupita's or ghost abuse. She wasn't a detective. How the fuck did Terrible or Bump expect her to look at this poor dead girl and know whether or not a ghost had done this?

Of course...shit, she already knew one hadn't, at least not alone. Ghosts couldn't do magic. Unless the girl had been trying out an incredibly strong new spell—not likely, as the kind of power Chess felt

wasn't the kind just anyone could project—or her murderer had definitely been human.

Red Berta shoved someone forward, one of the hookers standing in the circle. The girl stumbled on her teetery shoes and righted herself, but not before Chess saw how high she was.

“I hadda go get somethin’,” the girl mumbled, swaying in place.

“You left Daisy alone to die.” Red Berta fixed her with a glare that would have made a sober person quake. At almost six feet tall, Berta wasn't someone to mess with. She'd been a showgirl before Haunted Week—Haunted Week and an attack from a razor-wielding ghost. Berta had survived. Her looks had not.

Chess glanced at Terrible's impassive face, then back at the girl. “Did you see anything? When you got back?”

“Bettin she saw lots a things,” someone whispered in the back. “Flowers an puppies floatin upward the sky, aye?”

“Saw the spook.” The girl hugged herself. “Saw it disappear when I come back.”

“You saw the ghost?”

“Aye.”

“What did it look like?”

“Wearin a hat.”

Fear rippled through the crowd as everyone took a step back. “She seen the Cryin Man.” “Cryin Man wear a hat.”

Before Chess could reply Berta spoke up. “Terrible.” She nodded across the street.

Chess followed the look with the slow sinking feeling of someone

whose night had just gone from worse to deadly.

Slobag's men watched them from the alley.

“Violence is the worst of humanity’s foibles, and the least necessary. The Church protects you from the need to perform such acts; there is no excuse for violent behavior in modern society.”

-- *The Book of Truth*, Laws Article 347

Chapter Three

It wasn’t a large crowd. Five, perhaps six men stood in the shadows, caught by the firelight. They didn’t move when all faces turned toward them. Somehow that stillness was more threatening than sharpening machetes or playing with guns would have been, as if they knew beyond a doubt there would be no reliable defense against an attack.

Then Terrible stood up, lifting the bottom of his bowling shirt so the diamond-patterned handle of his knife showed. Chess tried not to respond; on his opposite hip the brushed steel butt of a gun reflected the watery moonlight. When had he started carrying a gun? Usually he didn’t, at least not so obviously.

Next to Chess, Berta reached up and extracted what looked like a machete from the crimson birds’-nest of her hair. In an instant the mood changed, from terrified sadness to hot rage. Excitement. Butterfly knives opened in a blur of metal, zippers gave way so sharpened nail files and pipes could be pulled from cheap nylon purses. One of the girls flicked open an ivory-handled straight razor that had to be a hundred years old.

Nobody spoiled for a fight like a group of Downside hookers around the corpse of one of their own.

Slobag's men didn't move. Fuck! What was she supposed to do here? Slobag's men were Lex's men, and she somehow doubted he'd take too kindly to her fighting with them, no matter how much he liked having her in his bed. On the other hand, Terrible was her friend, and the people around her were—well, they were his friends, or his to protect anyway.

Not to mention the dead body turning into ice on the pavement at her feet.

“Chess,” Terrible said, his lips barely moving. He held his head like he was sniffing the air for prey. “Whyn't you head back into yon alley, aye? Get yourself offen the street.”

“I have my knife.”

“Naw, naw. Get on out. Ain't your fight.”

Ain't going to be a fight at all, if she had anything to say about it. She held up her hand, intending to pat him on the back or arm, something to show her thanks, but she dropped it before it reached him. It would only be a distraction.

Instead she pulled her phone out of her bag as she picked her way through the black alley. Things rustled and moved in the garbage piled along the battered walls. Rats, probably. Maybe cats or small dogs. She stepped carefully, hearing the sliding *shink* of Terrible's knife being drawn as she opened the phone.

The bright screen hurt her eyes and made her feel like a fucking target, standing there in a pool of light. It hit her then what she'd done.

Left the fight, picked up a phone. Target indeed. She didn't have much time.

Her fingers didn't shake as she scrolled down to Lex's name. He was only one of three numbers she had programmed into the phone.

Her ass hit something hard and sharp-edged when she crouched down. A metal box of some kind. Her mind automatically took note of it—it looked like just the sort of place to hide electronic equipment of the kind used to fake hauntings—but Lex picked up before she had time to really register it.

“Hey, tulip, what you up to this night?”

“Call them off, Lex,” she whispered, but as the words left her mouth she knew she was too late. Someone shouted. The fight was on. They clashed in the middle of the street opposite, giving her a perfect view of what was happening. Not just five or six of Slobag's men; at least as many again poured onto the street from somewhere. How many had been waiting, and why? Did they just keep an eye on the street, or what?

“Call who off? Ain't know what you saying. You right?”

“No, I'm not fucking right. Your men, Lex. Slobag's men. They're here, they're—” A scream cut her off. Red Berta in full battle cry, the voice that used to belt out show tunes striking fear into the hearts of anyone within a few miles. The machete sliced through the air sideways and grabbed a piece of one of Slobag's men. He screamed and stumbled sideways.

Terrible didn't miss a beat, grabbing the man's hair and slamming a heavy fist into his face. The man fell. Terrible turned to the next one.

All around were the hookers, stabbing at the men with their small

blades, wielding pipes like pros. Sharp heels dug into soft leather shoes. They were holding their own, but they were outnumbered. Even as Chess watched one of the girls went flying, her screech ending abruptly when her face hit the street.

“The fuck is that sound? Where you at?”

“I’m on Forty-fifth, dammit, Forty-fifth and Berrie, and there’s a bunch of your guys here and they’ve started a—”

“What you doing there? Ain’t nowhere near your place.”

“Can we talk about this later? Call them off, now.”

Metal scraped the pavement. A long, slim knife skittered across the mouth of the alley, the blade sticky and dark. One of the men fell. His blood steamed in the cold air.

“Shit. A fight? You safe, tulip?”

“For about the next two minutes. Lex, I’m not kidding here. There’s a fight, and it’s on Forty-fifth and I’m stuck in the fucking middle of it, please find out who it is and call them off!”

Another scream. Blood spurted from a gaping black wound in one of the hookers’ arms. Chess couldn’t tell which one she was, and in a moment the girl had disappeared, another wounded fighter in a crowd full of them. Over it all Terrible’s face, oddly peaceful, totally absorbed. As she watched he ducked down, catching a man mid-leap and shoving the man over his shoulder and onto the street. His knife flashed in his fist.

“Stay on, aye? Gimme a minute.” Over the screams and shouts of the brawl she heard him speaking Cantonese to someone, heard several different voices answer back.

Chess crouched lower in her not-very-good hiding place, her stare focused on the fight. Berta kept swinging her machete, southpaw. Chess expected to see heads start flying at any second. With her free hand she found her knife; her palm was so sweaty it took her three tries to get a grip on it and pull it out. Just in case...

“Tulip? You there?”

It took her a few seconds to find her voice. “Yeah. I’m here.”

“Aye, hang on there. All be over soon. You all hidden up? Stay out of sight. Them dudes, they ain’t know you, dig?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I get it.”

“What you doing on Forty-fifth?”

“Terrible asked me—”

“Terrible’s there? All by hisself, aye?”

“No, not by himself. There’s a fucking army here, okay? And even if he was by himself—which he isn’t—I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Thought you was fun.”

“I’m not.”

“Why he ask you to go there for, anyhow? Ain’t safe there, you know that.”

“There’s a—there’s a dead girl. One of Bump’s girls.” Hell, he was going to find out anyway, if any of his men made it back safely. Which she guessed they would. A voice rose over the shrieks of the girls on the street, Chinese racheting through the empty air. A call to retreat, she hoped.

“Oh? Looks like somebody getting some payback,” Lex said with satisfaction. The empty eye sockets of the dead girl flashed into Chess’s mind. If he’d been standing in front of her she’d have tried to slap him.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Ain’t talking about nothing. Just saying, is all.”

“What’s that—I gotta go.” She snapped the phone shut as Terrible appeared at the end of the alley, his broad form blocking out what little light there was. Behind him she saw Slobag’s men becoming shadows again, disappearing into the spaces between the buildings.

“Come on out now, Chess.”

Her legs didn’t want to support her as she stood. More bodies appeared—Red Berta, a few of the other girls, Chess couldn’t tell which ones. All were panting like they’d just tried to run from one side of town to the other, but they were alive.

Most of them, anyway. The hooker Chess had watched fly through the air did not get back up. Neither did four of Slobag’s men. Red Berta and her girls emptied the dead mens’ pockets with crisp efficiency, like murderous bank tellers.

Chess dug into her bag and pulled out a some tissues, which she used to dab at the deep, swelling cut under Terrible’s eye. She had to brace her free hand against his chest and stand on tiptoe to do it, putting her face only inches from his.

Their eyes met, and heat flooded her skin. Her heels slammed back onto the sidewalk. “Sorry, maybe, um, maybe you should—here.”

She shoved the wad of tissue at him, felt him take them from her. Too bad he couldn’t take away the confusion—and something like panic—making her stomach feel like someone was tickling it from the inside. Stupid sex magic.

She cleared her throat. “Another half-inch to the left and you’d

need a hospital.”

Orangeish light caught the wet spots on his shirt and illuminated a long tear in one sleeve. Beneath it the flesh was almost as raw as his knuckles.

“Naw, I’m right.” He took the tissue away, sniffled, put it back.

“It’ll scar.”

A deep rumble of laughter. “Guess another scar make a difference?”

He had her there.

“What’s your thinkin on Daisy?”

“Wh—oh.” The dead girl still lay on the pavement. Whitish frost on her skin turned her into an eerie sculpture, like the statues of the original Church leaders outside the Government Headquarters up Northside. Those were carved from ivory stone, coated with diamond dust to make them gleam. The rime on Daisy’s dead body carried the same illusion, making her mutilated form beautiful.

“I don’t—I don’t know. If it was a ghost, I mean. It’s really too soon for me to tell, it’s so dark and...” Chess shivered. She’d have to tell him about the sex spell, but not now. Not when her blood still simmered a little too fast for comfort.

“Aye. Don’t worry on it, Chess. Maybe you free tomorrow, come back for another look? In the daylight, dig. Bring your Church stuff, them little machines and all you use.”

“I thought you didn’t think it was a ghost.”

His eyelids flickered, and he nodded toward the huddle of girls, counting up their money and lighting the dead men’s smokes. “They do. Bump an me, we ain’t so sure. You ain’t think it’s fair chances, them

showing up here this night, aye?”

“You think—”

“I pick you up tomorrow round midday, cool?”

She didn't want to. It wasn't that she didn't want to help him; it was that Lex's words about payback wouldn't stop reverberating in her head. If this was a gang thing, some sort of territory struggle, she did *not* need to be involved. Her life worked, as much as it could. Getting in between the people to whom she owed her loyalty—the one person to whom she owed loyalty, anyway, all Bump did was sell her pills and run the closest pipe room to her apartment—and the one with whom she swapped bodily fluids probably wasn't the best way to make sure it kept working.

But there really was no good way to refuse. It wouldn't just look suspicious, it would be... It would be wrong.

She glanced again at Daisy's body, abandoned like a busted Dream pipe on the cracked and pitted sidewalk. If it weren't for the Church that could have been her. Probably would have been her. Certainly it was what she'd grown up expecting.

So she nodded. “They told me not to worry about coming in tomorrow, not after what happened tonight. No new cases anyway.”

“They give you the day off? How bad your night go?”

“Oh...it was nothing. I got poisoned a little bit. They had an antidote, no big deal.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“Don't look at me like that. I'm here, right? No problem. Where's the girl who saw the ghost?”

He started to say something, then stopped himself. “Laria. She name is Laria.”

“Yeah, her.” Chess scanned the little crowd of women, picking out the frizzy brown head. Laria stood near the back, a confused look on her face. Chess tried to catch the girl’s eye, but she wasn’t sure if it were possible for anyone to catch the girl’s eye at this stage; she looked like she was ready to keel over backward.

“I get her.”

Laria looked younger close up than Chess had originally thought. Sixteen, perhaps, or seventeen at the oldest. Her pale blue jacket had grayish stains on the sleeves and a tear in one elbow. When she squeezed her arms tighter around her chest her pinkish-white skin poked through the hole like a turtle peeping from its shell.

“Laria, I’m Chess. Could you tell me what you saw earlier? The man who killed Daisy?”

Laria shook her head. Her clouded brown eyes filled with tears. “Ain’t seen nothing.”

“You said earlier you saw—”

Laria shook her head again. Her hair moved with it like a clump of dirty steel wool.

Chess glanced at Terrible, not bothering to hide her irritation. She had sympathy, sure, but it was late and freezing cold and she just wanted to go home, and Laria’s reticence wasn’t helping anyone.

He gripped Laria’s arm. “You tell she, girl. Only way to for us to catch him, dig?”

“I ain’t—”

“Ain’t nothing. You the one left she alone so’s you could go stab up, aye? Least you owe she some knowledge.”

Laria gasped; Terrible’s fist was so tight around her arm his thumb rested on the second knuckle of his middle finger. “Terrible, you hurting—”

“Be hurting worse, you don’t talk up.”

Chess held out her hand. “We can do this tomorrow, can’t we?”

“Come the morrow she won’t get any recall,” he said. “Gotta get what we can now.”

Laria’s cheeks were wet. “He had a hat on. All’s I remember he had a hat on.”

“He big? Small? You see through him?” Terrible’s grip relaxed, his voice softened. “Come on, Laria. You recall it, aye? You just gotta think on it.”

“He weren’t big. Ain’t much bigger’n me. He were bendin over her when I come close enough to see—he stood up and he was...” Laria swallowed once, then again. “I seed through him.”

“He was transparent?”

“Could see through him,” Laria whispered. “’Ceptin he looked up at me, under the brim o’ his hat, aye...funny hat, with a point in the center and them flaps on the side, on the ears? All of him clear, his clothes and all, ‘ceptin...” She raised a hand to her face, patted trembling fingers beneath her eye.

“His eyes?” The chill creeping up Chess’s spine had nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

“Not his eyes,” Laria said, and it came out like the low moan of a

wounded animal. “Hers.”

“What?”

Laria started to cry. “Him were wearin she eyes.”