

Note: This excerpt is taken from the pre-copied version of the manuscript, and may differ slightly from the final version

CITY OF GHOSTS ©Stacia Kane 2010

“Not all of your duties will be pleasant. But that is the sacrifice you make, for as a Church employee you must always remember that you are privileged above all others.”

--The Example is You, the guidebook for Church employees

Chapter One

The guillotine waited for them, its blackened wood dark and threatening against the naked cement walls of the Execution Room.

Chess limped past it, trying not to look. Trying not to remember that she deserved to kneel before it, to place her neck on the age-smoothed rest and wait for the blade to fall. She'd killed a psychopomp. Hell, she'd killed *people*.

Only the death of the hawk meant automatic execution.

But nobody knew about that. At least, nobody with the authority to order her death knew about that. She was safe for the moment.

Too bad she didn't feel safe. Didn't feel the way she should have felt. The dull ache in her thigh with every step she took in her low-heeled Church pumps reminded her of the almost-healed gunshot wound; her limp reminded everyone else, drew attention to her at a time when she wanted it even less than usual.

Elder Griffin's hand was warm at her elbow. “You may sit while the sentence is read and carried out, Cesaria.”

“Oh, no, really, I'm—”

He shook his head, his eyes serious. What was that about? Granted, an execution wasn't exactly a party-it-up event; very few Church events were. But Elder Griffin looked even more solemn than usual, more troubled.

He didn't know, did he? Had Oliver Fletcher told him about the psychopomp, about what she'd done? If that bast—no. No, she was being stupid and paranoid. Oliver wouldn't have told him. When would he have? As far as she knew the two men had only shared one conversation since that night, the night she'd killed the psychopomp, the night Terrible had been—

Her breath rasped in her chest. Right. This wasn't the time, or the place. This was an execution, and she had testimony to give, and she needed to calm the fuck down and give it.

So she sat on the hard, straight-backed wooden chair, breathing the disinfectant stink heavy in the room, and watched the others file in after her. Elder Murray, the rings painted around his eyes as black as his hair, almost disappearing against the rich darkness of his skin. Dana Wright, the other Debunker who'd been at the bust at Madame Lupita's, her light hair curling around her face.

For Lupita herself, no one came. Anyone who might have cared about her, who might have wanted to be there for her in the last moments of her physical life, had either already been executed themselves or were locked in their cells in the prison building.

Last—last before the condemned woman herself—came the executioner, his face obscured by a heavy black hood. On his open right palm rested a dog's skull; his psychopomp, ready to take Madame Lupita down to the spirit prisons. Clenched in his left fist was a chain, and at the end of that chain was Madame Lupita, her legs and wrists shackled together with iron bands.

The door *thunked* shut behind them, the lock popped; it would not open for half an hour. Time enough for the execution to take place and the spirit to be taken to the City of Eternity. The timelocks had been instituted in the early days of the Church, when a series of mishaps had led to a ghost opening the door and escaping. Like everything the Church did, the timelocks made sense, but Chess couldn't help the tiny thrill of panic that ran up her spine. Trapped. Something she never wanted to be.

The executioner fastened the chain-end he held to the guillotine, and began setting up the skull at the base of the permanent altar in the corner. Smoke poured from his censer and overpowered the scent of bleach and ammonia; the thick, acrid odor of melidia

to send Lupita's soul to the spirit prisons, ajenjible and asafetida, burning yew chips to sting Chess's nose. The energy in the room changed, power slithering up her legs and lifting the hair on the back of her neck, that little rush that always made her want to smile.

She didn't, though. Not today. Instead she pressed her teeth together and looked at the condemned woman.

Lupita had changed since Chess saw her last, in that miserable, hot little basement that stunk of terror and burned herbs and poison. Her big body seemed to have shrunk. Instead of the ridiculous silver turban Chess remembered, Lupita wore only her own close-shorn hair; instead of the silly sideshow caftan her bulk was hidden beneath the plain black robe of those sentenced to die.

But her eyes had not changed. They searched the little crowd, found Chess, and glared, hatred burning from their depths so hard Chess almost felt it sear her skin.

She forced herself not to look away. That woman had almost killed her, slipping poison into her drink; had almost killed a roomful of innocent people, summoning a rampaging, violent ghost. Fuck her. She was going to die, and Chess was going to watch.

Something slithered behind Lupita's eyes.

Chess' breath froze in her chest. Had she seen that? That flash of silver? That flash, which meant Lupita was Hosting a spirit in her body?

Her eyes widened; she stared at Lupita now, focusing. Waiting. It shouldn't be possible. Lupita hadn't been Hosting when she was arrested—they would have caught that immediately when she was brought in—and there was no way in hell she would have been able to pick up and bond with a spirit in the Church prisons. It simply wasn't possible.

The flash didn't reappear. No. She was imagining things. All the stress, the tension of her personal life—what there was of it—and the overbearing sympathy of the Elders and the other Debunkers, crushing her beneath their concern for her leg and their good intentions. Add to that a few extra Cepts and a Panda, and half a Nip to keep her awake... No wonder she was seeing things. What was next, pink elephants?

Elder Griffin stood before the guillotine, cleared his throat.

"Irene Lowe, also known as Madame Lupita, thou has been found guilty by the Church of the crime of summoning spirits to earth. Further, thou has been found guilty of

the attempted murder of Church Debunker Cesaria Putnam. Cesaria, is this woman responsible for those crimes?"

Chess stood up, despite the protests of her right thigh and Elder Griffin's slight frown. "Yes, Elder."

"Thou testifies this based on what?"

"I saw this woman commit those crimes, Elder."

"And thou swears thy word to be Fact, and Truth?"

"Yes, Elder. I do."

Elder Griffin gave her a curt nod, turned next to Dana Wright while Chess sank back onto her chair. A woman was about to die, based on her word. When her word—the word of a junkie and a liar, the word of someone who'd betrayed her only real friend in the world—wasn't worth shit.

He was never going to speak to her again. She'd given up calling the week before. She'd given up hoping she might see him out at Trickster's or Chuck's, given up hanging around the Market in the cold waiting to see if he turned up. He was still out there, of course. People had seen him.

People who weren't her. She'd never known anyone could avoid another person so thoroughly. It was like he could sense her coming.

Shifting movement in the standing crowd drew her attention back to the proceedings; the execution itself was about to happen.

The room thrummed with power now, beating like a heart around them, steady and slow and thick. No need for a circle; the room itself was a circle, an impregnable fortress with iron sandwiched into the cement walls.

Elder Griffin started pounding the drum, letting his hand stay in the air for so long between hits Chess felt herself waiting, breathless, unable to move or allow her lungs to fill until the next heavy thump. The room's magic slid into her, finding those empty spaces and filling them, making her something more than she was. It felt good. So good she wanted to close her eyes and give herself to it completely, to forget everything and everyone and do nothing but exist in the energy.

She couldn't, of course. She knew she couldn't. So instead she watched as the

executioner's psychopomp formed, the dog growing out of the skull, flowing like a river from a mountain peak to become legs, a tail, hair sprouting glossy and black over the bare skin and bones.

The drum beat faster. Drums...there had been drums at Lupita's séance, that night, played by a duo of speedfreaks with eyes like ball bearings. Now the drums again, keeping monotonous dragging time under Elder Murray's voice.

"Irene Lowe, thou are found guilty and sentenced to die by a tribunal of Church Elders, and this sentence shall now be carried out. If thou has any last words to speak, speak them now."

Lupita shook her head, staring at the floor. Chess reached out a little with her own power, trying to get some sense of something from the woman. Some fear, some anger. Anything. Lupita was too quiet. Too calm. This didn't feel right.

The executioner helped Lupita to her knees, placed her neck on the divot. The drum beat harder, louder even than Chess's blood in her veins or the thick sweet magic air rasping in her lungs. Louder than her own thoughts.

She reached out further, letting her power caress Lupita's skin, trying to find something—

Oh fuck!

Her leg gave when she threw herself to her feet, almost falling over. "No! No, don't—"

Too late. The blade fell, its metallic *shnik* slicing the air as cleanly as Irene's neck, thudding into place like the slamming of a prison door.

Irene's head tumbled into the basket. Blood erupted from the stump of her neck, poured over her head, over the dull cement floor.

Her spirit rose; her spirit, the spirit that had been Madame Lupita. The dog lunged for it, ready to drag it below the earth, into the prisons outside the City of Eternity.

The other spirit rose as well. The spirit Lupita'd been Hosting. The one there was no psychopomp to take care of, no graveyard dust to subdue. The one an entire roomful of Church employees were helpless against in that room with its iron walls and locked door.

Chess' scream finally escaped, bursting into the air. It was drowned out by the

others, the shouts of surprise and fear.

Elder Griffin dropped the drum. The dog grabbed Lupita's spirit—she had a passport on her arm, she was the one he'd been summoned to retrieve—and dove into the patch of wavering air behind the wall. The last thing Chess saw of Lupita was her mouth stretched into a horrible grin as she left them all to die.

The ghost hovered in the air before the guillotine. A man, his hair slicked back from his forehead, his eyes blank, his face twisted with savage joy. Elder Murray shouted something, she couldn't be sure what; her skin tingled and itched and threatened to crawl away from her body entirely. A powerful ghost, too powerful. What the fuck was he, how the fuck had she—

"I command you to be still!" Elder Griffin's voice rang out, echoed off the walls, speared through Chess' body. "By my power I command it!"

It wouldn't work. She knew without even looking that it wouldn't. But the executioner...did he have another skull? Some graveyard dirt?

Dana screamed. Chess glanced over and saw the ghost fighting with Elder Murray, its mouth open in a ghastly smile, its eyes narrow with effort. The ghost held the ritual blade in its hand, the one the executioner had used to summon his psychopomp.

No time to watch. No time to look at them, and it wouldn't do any good anyway. The room was filled with noise and energy and heat, a confusing mishmash of images her brain couldn't process. She focused on the smoking censor, the stang in the corner, the black bag beside it. The executioner dug through it frantically, pulling things out—

Someone fell into her; she tumbled to the hard floor with a thud.

More screams, more shouts. Something clattered to the floor. The energy was unbearable. It wasn't a rush anymore, wasn't a high. It was an invasion, shoving her around, distorting her thoughts and her vision and infecting her with everyone else's panic.

She had to calm down. Her hands refused to obey her; her tattoos prickled and burned, as they were designed to do. The ghost's presence set them off, an early warning system she was usually grateful for but would gladly have done without at that moment. Chaos reigned in the execution room, and it carried her along on a wild riptide of blood.

Okay. Deep breath. Pause. She closed her eyes, dug down deep to the emptiness in

her soul. The place where things like love and happiness and warmth should be; the place that was an almost-empty room for her, the place where only two people lived, and one of them hated her.

But it was enough. It was enough to have that moment of silence, to tune out the terror and noise around her and find her own strength.

She opened her eyes. Her limbs obeyed her. She sprang to her feet, ignoring the pain, and almost lost her hard-fought calm.

Elder Murray was dead. His body lay stretched across the floor, flat-out like a corpse ready for cremation; a gaping bloody wound leered at her from his throat.

Behind him the executioner slumped against the wall, his robe soaked with blood. She barely saw him through the ghost, blazing white, bloated with the energy he'd stolen. Chess groaned. A ghost with that much power was like an ex-con on Cloud-laced speed; unstoppable, without feelings, without logic. A killing machine who wouldn't stop until he was forced to.

And they were locked in with it.

Oh shit, they were locked in with *them*. The iron walls kept the spirits of Elder Murray and the executioner locked in just as surely as the rest of them; Chess saw them out of the corner of her eye, faint shapes struggling to come into being.

There was a chance they wouldn't be hungry, that they wouldn't become murderous, but the odds were about as good as the odds that she'd be able to fall asleep that night without a handful of her pills. In other words, not fucking good at all. In a minute or so the ghosts would find their shapes, find their powers, and things would go from worse to totally fucking awful.

Blood splattered the walls, dripped off the shiny blade of the guillotine and ran in thick streams along the cement. It dripped from the ceiling where it had sprayed from Elder Murray's neck; it formed a glistening pool around the body, outlined footprints in a dizzying pattern, and smeared around the broken remains of the dog's skull. Fuck. No psychopomp. Did he have another?

Elder Griffin was covered with blood. Dana too, her eyes wide. But Chess wasn't the only one who'd rallied. Dana's eyes were dark and fierce with determination; Elder

Griffin fairly glowed with power and strength.

Chess caught Dana's eye, jerked her head toward the bag. Dana nodded and took a step forward.

"By my power I command you to be still," she said, each word loud and clear. "I command you to go back to your place of silence."

The ghost turned to look at her, and Dana edged back, drawing it away. Chess inched to the left, trying not to catch the ghost's attention. She had to get to that bag. Had to get to the bag or they would all die. Maybe they'd die anyway, but she was damned if she wasn't going to at least try to save them. Life might be a pool of shit but the City was worse—for her anyway—and she had no intention of going there. Not that day.

Her feet in their stiff shoes slipped in thick blood; the scent of it filled the air, a coppery tang beneath the herbs. How long would those burn, and was there more?

The ghost moved toward Dana, who kept talking, words of power flowing from her mouth. He clutched the knife in one semi-solid hand, blood dripping down the blade and covering his spectral skin. Viewed through him it looked black, like ink.

She glanced at the ghosts of Murray and the executioner again. They were almost fully formed now, slowly squirming into being like maggots erupting from a slab of rotting steak. She—they—didn't have much time.

Dana screamed. The ghost jumped at her. Elder Griffin leapt to the side, joining the struggle, as the ghost attempted to slice Dana's throat.

Chess dove for the bag. More herbs, first—she grabbed the little baggies, dumped them on the dying fire in the censor. The smoke thickened. Another psychopomp, please let him have a spare...she threw things from his bag, not watching where they landed, the hair on the back of her neck practically trying to pull itself out of her skin. She couldn't hear much, what was happening? Were Dana and Elder Griffin dead? Oh, shit—

Her hand found something solid, and her body flooded with relief. Another skull. Thank the gods who didn't exist, he had a spare. She yanked it out, tore at the inert silk wrapping it, barely glanced at it as she set it down.

A roar behind her; the ghost had spotted her. Dana and Elder Griffin tried to hold it but it made itself transparent and sprang at her, through the guillotine. She ducked out

of the way. "I call on the escorts of the City of the Dead," she managed, stumbling, trying to keep within reach of the skull but away from the ghost's grabbing hand. "By my power I call you!"

The skull rattled. Chess pushed more power out, as much as she could, not an easy task when trying to keep from being turned into an energy snack for a rampaging dead man.

Another problem faced her as well. No passport. The spirit hadn't been accounted for, didn't have a marking on his body; there was a chance the dog wouldn't know which spirit to grab, when it came. It had happened to Chess once before, a few months previously, and the dog had gone after her. She would never forget that feeling, the horrible sensation of her soul being pulled from her body like the peel off a banana...

Not to mention the additional spirits forming not five feet away, the executioner and Elder Murray.

"No passport," she managed to say, and Dana's eyes widened. She glanced at the knife in her hand, raised her eyebrows, and Chess nodded because she had no choice.

Dana tossed the knife. The ghost spun around when it clattered to the floor, leapt for it. Chess grabbed the executioner's ectoplasm marker and popped the cap, held it ready in her fist, and shouted.

Just as she'd thought, the ghost wheeled back around and came after her with the knife. Dana and Elder Griffin moved, Chess didn't see where. She was too busy watching the ghost, seeing his solid hand raise over her head, grabbing his wrist with her left hand and bringing the marker up with her right.

He didn't have a passport; they hadn't expected him, hadn't designed one. Oh fucking well. The blade hovered above her eye, its point tacky with coagulating blood, while she scrawled a series of X's on the spectral skin. The ghost's face twisted with rage.

Now for the worst part. With every bit of strength she had left she pushed herself to the side, to the skull, and, dropping the marker, brought her right hand to the blade's point.

She hadn't expected it to hurt instantly but it did. Ow, it really fucking did, and her blood poured from the wound onto the skull, and she shoved all of that pain and all of her

power into her next words.

“I offer the escorts an appeasement for their aid. Escorts come now! Take this man to the place of silence, by my power and by my blood I command it!”

The dog roared into being, huge and shaggy. Its jaws bared; this wasn't just a dog it was a wolf, what the fuck was the executioner doing with an unauthorized psychopomp—

The ghost's eyes widened. His mouth opened in a silent scream as he tried to jump away, all thoughts of killing forgotten. The dog—the wolf—went after him, its body moving low and fast like the predator it was.

The ghosts of the executioner and Elder Murray were fully formed now, huddled in the corner. Chess could practically see the last vestiges of sanity, of who they were in life, draining away, could see them trying to hold on.

It didn't matter. The wolf howled. A hole ripped open in the thin veil between her world and the spirit one; the wolf snatched the original ghost in its massive jaw. Ectoplasm burst from the ghost's body under the wolf's teeth. The ghost screamed, an act somehow more horrible because of its silence.

The wolf turned, aimed at Elder Murray and the executioner. They huddled together, trying so hard; tears sprang to Chess's eyes. She'd never known Elder Murray well, never dealt much with him, but his last act was to struggle to retain some humanity, and she couldn't help the surge of affectionate sadness, of pride, that threatened to overwhelm her.

Dana and Elder Griffin were beside her, Dana squeezing her hand. The wolf leapt, still clutching their unwelcome visitor in its teeth, and caught Elder Murray and the executioner in a bizarre sort of bear hug; he carried them through the wavering hole and it snapped shut behind them, leaving the three still alive to stare open-mouthed at where it had been.

“The most sacred vows are those given to the Church, and overseen by the Church, for those involve not just the heart and mind but the soul.”

--*The Book of Truth*, Laws Article 331

Chapter Two

“I don’t understand how it could have happened,” Elder Griffin said again. They’d returned to his office, the welcoming, soothing room full of skulls and books. For once the television mounted by the ceiling was off; usually the Elder kept it on all the time to keep him company.

Apparently he didn’t feel much like companionship at the moment. Neither did Chess, but then, she never did. What was the point? You let people into your life and you ended up getting hurt. Or hurting them. Either way, the road to pain was paved with other people, and she wanted no part of it anymore.

At least that’s what she kept telling herself. Just then it worked. Usually of late it didn’t. Once the decision was made to open up to someone, to welcome them...it wasn’t so easy to accept that the place she’d opened for them was empty. And always would be.

Especially when it was her fault.

“I don’t see how she could have made it past the detectors,” Dana said, echoing something Chess herself had wondered earlier but without providing the answer Chess had come up with.

She gave it now. “She didn’t. She wasn’t hosting when we busted her.”

“But that isn’t—”

“I was there, Dana.” Chess paused, gave the other woman a small smile in an attempt to make her words less harsh. She’d never had a problem with Dana and wasn’t interested in starting one up. “I mean, I know you were there too, but I felt her energy. She stole mine, remember? So I know she wasn’t hosting. There was nothing inside that

woman but dumpster cag-mag and that awful tea.”

“Dumpster cag-mag?” Elder Griffin looked puzzled. Shit. She shouldn’t have said that. He knew she lived in Downside, of course, but didn’t really know what that meant. Nobody did. And that was the way she liked it.

“It’s a—it just means, scraps of whatever meat’s about to go off. Like you get in the butcher’s dumpster.”

The Elder’s eyebrows raised; his shoulders relaxed. Like she’d said something that pleased him.

Which made no sense at all. Why would that make him happy?

“So you have managed to learn something about the area,” he said. “You’re not so separate from your neighbors there as I had assumed.”

For the first time in a while, Chess felt almost like laughing. Yeah, she’d managed to find a way to fit in with the rest of Downside. That was one way to look at it.

“Yes,” she managed finally, dragging her tired mind back to Elder Griffin. Shit. Only ten at night and she was exhausted. She had more speed in her bag; hopefully they’d be done with this soon and she could go bump up.

Or, fuck that. She could go sleep. Drop an Oozer, drift away...maybe she’d even get lucky, and not dream.

Her dreams didn’t tend to be cheerful these days. But then they never really had been.

Elder Griffin smiled, the kind of smile that made Chess wonder even more what exactly he was up to, but he didn’t speak. Muffled voices came through the door; the scuffle of feet on the shiny wide floor of the hall outside the office.

Dana shivered. “I still can’t believe it,” she said. “Elder Murray... It doesn’t seem real.”

Elder Griffin’s face rearranged itself into more sympathetic lines, but when he spoke Chess heard the steel beneath his bland tone. It made her own eyes widen. She didn’t think she’d ever heard him speak to anyone like that—at least, not anyone still living. “Remember, Dana, Elder Murray will still be with us in spirit. There is no reason to mourn.”

“Of course not.” Dana straightened up in her seat, pushed her light hair back from her face. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t implying anything. I’m just shocked. I liked Elder Murray.”

“I liked him as well. And for that reason, Dana, and because I know the Truth, I rejoice for Elder Murray. The peace he’s found in the City, the quiet...” Elder Griffin shook his head. “I envy him.”

With difficulty Chess suppressed a shudder. The City...ugh. What Elder Griffin thought was peace, she thought was emptiness. What he thought was quiet, she thought was horrifying loneliness, with no pills or anything to make it bearable.

“We’ll set the ceremony for...” He flipped the pages in the daily calendar sitting on the shiny wide desktop before him. “Friday. Yes. Four days from now is Friday—’tis so late I forgot for a moment what day it was. Friday, Dana, you shall have your chance to see Elder Murray’s happiness for yourself.”

Dana nodded, her expression cleared. Meanwhile Chess felt as if someone had shoved a blender into her gut. With everything else, the deaths and the wondering where that damned wolf had come from and—okay, and her stupid babyish whining about her personal life, what a fucking joke—she’d forgotten about the Dedication ceremony. About what the death of an Elder would entail.

“Cesaria? Are you well?”

Chess nodded, opened her eyes wide and met Elder Griffin’s blue ones with as much innocence as she could muster. “Fine, sir. Fine. Just a little tired.”

“You do look tired.”

She didn’t respond. What was she supposed to say? Thanks?

“How is your leg, my dear? Do you feel well enough to come back to work officially?”

“Yes.” The word came out a little too loudly, a little too eagerly. She couldn’t help it. Yes, she wanted to get back to work. Wanted to have something to do besides sitting around her apartment being mocked by the empty walls, by the empty spot next to her on the sagging couch. Wanted something to do aside from avoiding having Lex inside, because she knew if she invited him into her apartment he would expect to be allowed into her body as well, and she didn’t think she could face that conversation.

Wasn't even sure she wanted to have it. Why? Why give up a friend and perfectly serviceable bed partner, for one who couldn't be avoiding her more obviously if he'd hung up signs around her neighborhood telling her to stay the hell away from him?

Elder Griffin didn't seem to think she was overeager, though. "Excellent. Excellent. Wait here, please."

Chess and Dana exchanged mystified looks as he unfolded himself from behind his desk and crossed the floor. In the pale yellowish glow from the gentle lamps his stockinged calves flashed, blood spatters from earlier dried the color of dead leaves forming lacy patterns against the white. He left the room and closed the high dark wood door behind him with a quiet click.

What was he doing? She would have thought he was going to get a new case file for her, but he wouldn't assign her a case right in front of Dana, not on a whim like that. She had no idea where she stood in the case queue, even; two weeks of hospitalization and another two weeks of enforced rest had taken her pretty far out of the game.

"So, back to work," Dana said, in the weary, flat tones of someone talking simply because they thought it would be rude not to talk.

Lucky for Chess, she didn't have the same concerns, or the same discomfort. She just nodded, pressed her palms together and glanced around the room. Glanced at Dana, taking in the other woman's blonde curls and expensive rings. Well, why not? Most Debunkers spent their money on actual things, rather than just buying anything they could swallow, smoke or snort.

Unlike Chess.

Speaking of which...three hours, now, since she'd taken the Panda and Cepts. She had plenty of time, a few more hours, but it never hurt to be aware.

The door opened, and Elder Griffin came back in, followed by Elder Thompson and a red-haired woman Chess had never seen before.

Not that it mattered, because the woman was clearly a Church employee. Her bare arms were decorated like Chess', like Dana's, with one glaring exception: the black snake, coiled up the length of her arm from wrist to shoulder, each scale perfectly delineated, the ink made of a silvery magical compound that gave off a faint shimmer in the dim light.

A member of the Black Squad. Church law enforcement—Church government, as opposed to Debunkers like Chess and Dana who were regular Church employees.

Her blood turned to ice in her veins. Had the woman come for her—had they found out? She'd been so careful, all this time, all these years, never letting anyone get too close, never letting anyone see her take so much as a fucking aspirin, and now—and in front of Dana, of all people? They were busting her in front of—no. No. She was being stupid, acting like some panicky moron, and she needed to stop it.

Preferably right that second, because the red-haired woman was looking at her rather oddly. Examining her, as if she could see the guilt. Not good. Chess tightened her grip on her own fingers to calm herself, and did not look away from the redhead's gaze. The woman wanted to play power games, wanted to have some dumbass little staredown? Fine. Her loss.

The woman smiled; then, very deliberately, she broke the contact and looked down at the floor. Ohhhkay. What did that mean?

“Dana,” Elder Griffin said, breaking into whatever the hell was happening, “perhaps you should go back to your cabin. Get some rest.”

Dana opened her mouth, then stopped. Elder Griffin's dismissal hadn't been rude, but it had been a dismissal just the same, and Dana wasn't stupid. She left in a flurry of muttered goodbyes.

Chess was alone with two Elders and a woman who probably had the power to throw her into prison just for looking at her funny, and the silence in the room pounded into her skull like a speedfreak with a hammer.

Elder Griffin sat down. “Cesaria, may I present Lauren Abrams? She just arrived from New York this morning.”

The woman—Lauren—held out one thin pale hand. Her tattoos went all the way down the back of it, like a fingerless glove; at the end of those bare fingers her nails were short like a man's, and shiny. “Nice to meet you, Cesaria. I've heard a lot about you.”

An electric hum ran up Chess's arm when she shook Lauren's hand. She ignored it. Ignored too the way Lauren clearly wanted her to ask what she'd heard, or make some kind of joke. It wasn't her job to jump through hoops, and she didn't like this one bit.

She'd done some work with the Black Squad before, a few little side jobs, but this was different. This time she wasn't being brought into a group and given a quick briefing; she wasn't meeting a gang of lower Squad members. Lauren's power, her air of command, told Chess more clearly than anything else could have that this woman was a higher-up. Very high. In fact...

"Abrams," she said. "Any relation to the Grand Elder?"

Lauren gave a light, soft laugh. "He's my father."

If Chess hadn't already been sitting down she might have stumbled. No fucking way. They were sending her on a case—there had to be a case here, either that or they were busting her, and she somehow suspected that if that's what was going on they would have done it already—with the fucking Grand Elder's daughter?

"Oh," she said finally, since everyone was looking at her as if they expected her to respond. "Okay."

Lauren sat down in Dana's empty chair, crossed her legs with a whisper of nylon. "I bet you're wondering what's going on."

Chess shrugged.

"We have...an offer for you. An investigation we think you could really help us with. Interested?"

"What is it?"

Lauren opened her mouth, but before she could speak Elder Thompson cleared his throat leaned forward, his heavy brows drawn together in a solid line. His eyebrows fascinated Chess; they seemed to grow wilder and thicker every time she saw him, while the hair on his head grew lighter and thinner. Like some sort of migration process was taking place. Someday she imagined the brows would simply fall over his eyes in a wiry curtain.

Lauren glanced at him, nodded, glanced back at Chess. "It's a very...sensitive case."

"All my cases are sensitive." What the hell was this? Why were they looking at her like they expected her to explode? "I don't gossip, if that's what you're implying."

"Oh, no, no, that's not it. It's just—I'm not explaining this very well." Lauren looked helplessly at Elder Griffin, biting her lipstick-coated lower lip.

Great. One of *those* women; tough and authoritative when it suited her, then acting

like a simpering poor-me baby when it didn't. So they wanted to bring her in on a case with the Grand Elder's pampered little daughter, who would expect Chess to do all the work while she batted her eyelashes and took all the credit? Ugh. No, thank you.

But then...how much money was in it? She fully expected she'd have to start paying for her own supplies again, once the bag she had ran out and she had to tell Lex she wasn't going to sleep with him anymore. So it wasn't like extra money wouldn't come in handy. The payout on her last case would have been huge, but she'd been forced to give it up to save her own skin, so... She was broke. As usual.

"Cesaria, the problem isn't that we do not trust you," Elder Griffin said. "It's that the sensitivity of this case, the subject of it, makes explaining a little difficult."

Elder Thompson folded his arms. "We can't tell you what it's about. Not until you agree to take it."

"What? I don't—"

"And it will require a Binding Oath."

Her mouth fell open. A Binding Oath? They had to be kidding. No. No way. They wanted her to take a case so serious it required an oath of secrecy—a form of magical control over her actions—and they weren't even going to tell her what it was about first? Not even a hint?

Lex would surely front her. If he was going to stop giving her what she needed for free, she knew he would at least front her until she got a real case, one where she'd get a bonus. It wouldn't be long, it never—

"The case comes with a bonus before you begin, simply for agreeing and accepting the Bind," Elder Griffin said. "Thirty thousand dollars. You will be given a thousand dollars a week on top of your salary for the duration of the case—we anticipate a resolution within two weeks, however—and an additional fifty thousand when it ends."

Her protest died in her throat. Eighty-two thousand dollars. Eighty thousand dollars minimum. That was a fuck of a lot of money.

That would buy her a fuck of a lot of oblivion. And the way things were going these days, oblivion was even more important than usual.

And she still needed a new car.

“I assume,” she said, pushing the words out through a throat gone gummy, “that it’s a dangerous case?”

Lauren Abrams rearranged her legs with another nylon hiss; Elder Thompson and Elder Griffin both watched her like they thought she might get up and run screaming from the room. None of them replied.

She’d just watched two people die. Her hand throbbed where she’d sliced it. Her thigh ached. She wanted a cigarette, and she wanted her pills. And she wanted eighty thousand dollars.

No matter what the case was.

“I’ll do it,” she said, and hoped it would be worth it.

“And we honor those first Elders above all others, for they were the Founders of our Church and thus the saviors of mankind.”

--*The Book of Truth*, Origins Article 1256

Chapter Three

Elder Griffin stood up. Light from the candles on the floor spilled across his face, cast jutting shadows over one eye. For a moment he looked alien, almost scary; then he turned further to his left, and was himself again.

Chess's heart pounded in her chest. It's just a bit of magic, she told herself. Just an oath, no different from the ones she'd taken when she started her training, certainly no different from the ones she'd taken when she completed that training and became a full Church employee at the age of twenty-one.

It didn't work, though. This was different, and she knew it. And she didn't like it. Nor did she like the energy rising in the room, sly and intrusive, or the peculiar smile on Lauren Abrams's face as she watched the Elders set up the altar.

Chess stood in the center of the room with her hands clasped behind her. Dried blood had settled into the fabric of her plain ceremonial dress, making her stomach protest a little when she thought about it. She didn't worry about the executioner and Elder Murray; what few blood- or fluid-borne diseases had survived the Church's strict quarantine and eradication policies, Church employees had been vaccinated against.

But Madame Lupita...disease aside, who the hell knew what sort of bacterial stew had simmered in her plaque-clotted veins? Realistically Chess knew the blood had dried so the risk was gone, but that didn't stop her from wanting to get the damned dress off as fast as she possibly could.

But of course, she didn't have much choice. And the sooner she took the damn Oath the sooner she got a nice fat check. She could slip it in the night deposit on her way home.

Movement to her left brought her back into the room, back into the ceremony. The Elders had started laying out a salt line, murmuring words of power as they moved solemnly clockwise. Lauren stood against the wall, outside the circle, watching them with her arms folded and her ankles crossed. Irritation prickled Chess's skin.

It wasn't that it was so unusual for her to dislike people right off the bat. That was pretty much the way she felt about everyone. But she wasn't usually forced to work with people she disliked right off the bat. She felt...intruded upon.

But then, nobody was forcing her to take the case. No, not forcing. Bribing. And she was taking the bribe, because she needed the money.

Behind the Elders the salt line erupted into shining deep purple, hissing faintly as it rose in thick lines and cast colored light across everything. Their white stockings glowed; their faces glowed; Elder Griffin's pale hair surrounded his head in a corona of blazing violet that made Chess's eyes sting.

Not just her eyes, either. The energy buzzed and twirled around her, battered against her skin. She was caught in it, a vortex of power swirling around her, catching her in it and twisting her inside out. She didn't know where to look, what to focus on; she couldn't bear to close her eyes.

So she looked down, focused on the dusty, blood-specked toes of her once-shiny black heels. It wasn't a good compromise. Her head swam; her feet looked vertiginously far away. But it was better than watching the Elders move, set up their bowls and set fire to their herbs, inside the sparkling, viciously bright dome.

The only good thing was that Lauren Abrams could no longer see her. The circle would block her view. It was some relief.

Smoke filled the circle, thick, choking smoke colored the same purple as the circle, the same color as the fire burning in a large fire-dish opposite her. She didn't want to breathe it in. Breathing it in was part of the Oath, part of the Binding. Even she didn't know what some of those herbs were, but when they entered her lungs they would enter her bloodstream, locking every cell of her body into the magical oath she was about to take.

Powerful binding herbs, too. The calamus herbs, vetiver and sweet flag, combined with the deep, throbbing energy of licorice root. She could feel them spreading through

her, finding every empty place, drawing her own magic and mixing with it. She was naked, open to them; they swept through her without caring, without feeling, winding from her feet to her head and forcing her to bend to their power.

This wasn't like the oaths she'd taken when she was initiated, not like the ones when she began her training. This was...this was heavy, dark magic, trapping her, squeezing against her with so much pressure she thought she might implode. Like nothing she'd ever experienced before. This wasn't right, it couldn't be right—

Dimly she heard the Elders speaking, saw vague movement as they added more herbs to the glowing purple fire in the north end of the circle. Myrrh and cedar, bergamot and dragon's blood. Her vision blurred. Shapes formed in the smoke; open mouths, staring eyes. Someone moaned. She wasn't sure if it was her.

Elder Thompson started chanting, low and slow, his voice thick with smoke and power and the spine-tingling thrust of command. She moved without intending to, bound by him. Bound by his commands. Somewhere deep down she fought against it.

She didn't want to do this anymore. She'd changed her mind. Her heart slammed around in her chest like a pinball caught between the paddles, trying frantically to escape. Her mind fought against the Elder, against what he wanted her to do, but she was caught. Trapped. Her hands rose at his words, turned so her pale wrists, veins blue-purple beneath the thin skin, faced the top of the dome.

Elder Griffin's hand on her arm. Desperately she swam through the smoke before her eyes, fought to see him. Fought the spell that slid hard hands up her legs, curled over her shoulders, caressed her stomach and breasts and stroked her neck. Everywhere.

Phantom hands, unfamiliar hands, all over her body. *No. No*, she'd sworn she wouldn't ever—wouldn't lie there, she wasn't a child anymore, she didn't have to do this. Didn't have to let them do this, she could fight, she was powerful. She was a witch, a fucking *Church witch*, she was grown up and she had the power now. She did not have to let them—not anymore—she didn't want this anymore, no...

"Stop." Her voice didn't work; her dry lips ached around the word. She couldn't do this, didn't want to be controlled anymore, couldn't give up her power. Couldn't give up her autonomy. Her independence. The strength she'd fought so fucking hard for, the right

to keep her own thoughts and her own body, to not be forced to let other people use her like a fucking toy, to ignore her until they took her out of her box to play with her some more, and cast her aside when they'd had their fun.

“Stop!” she tried again, but all that came out was a gurgle. Panic overtook her. She couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't feel her hands or feet. Elder Thompson's voice grew louder, thundering in her ears; his power forced itself into her, over her. Fighting with her to keep her still.

Her feet moved, like wading through half-dried cement. She had to get out. Had to. Fuck the money. It wasn't worth it, wasn't worth this, wasn't worth being trapped by heavy black hands and forced to give up everything she'd fought all her life to gain.

Elder Thomas was shouting now. His words slammed into her, beat her like fists. She pushed harder, aiming for the thick purple wall. Get out, she had to get out, had to—

Another hand on her, squeezing her arm. She tried to swing, to bat him away, but he caught her. “Cesaria. Cesaria. Cesaria.”

Elder Griffin. Elder Griffin speaking to her, his voice quiet but still somehow audible over Elder Thompson's roar. He repeated her name again, and again, and the tiny piece of her able to focus grabbed him, grabbed the sound of her name in his voice, and clung to it.

“Cesaria. I am here with you, Cesaria. Give in. Let go and have trust in me. You know me, Cesaria. I know you. You will not be hurt here, no one will hurt you. I promise it will end when you relax and you will come to no harm. I promise you...let go and it will end, stop fighting it, no one will hurt you. No one will hurt you, Cesaria, I promise...”

She didn't want to. Her head flew back and forth, denying it, refusing.

He kept speaking, the same soft litany over and over. Tears ran down her cheeks. She could feel them, taste them, salty and flavored with calamus and cayenne from the herbs invading her body.

Somewhere—she had no idea how long it took, how many times he repeated her name or urged her to give in and let Elder Thompson take control of her—she relaxed. Elder Griffin would not let anything happen to her. She knew he wouldn't. She trusted him as much as she trusted anyone, trusted him more than anyone except— She trusted

him, and he wouldn't let her get hurt, and gradually she felt the energy around her change, heard Elder Thompson's voice quiet. With a sigh she reached into herself; with a sigh she gave in to her trust.

The energy changed. Instantly, like a puzzle piece snapping into place. Not scary anymore, not dangerous. She was in this. She was resigned to it. She'd agreed to it and she was doing it, and suddenly she didn't care. In fact...

It filled her, sent her floating. Better than her pills. Better than a knob of Dream. Every cell in her body was pure power, pure thick sweetness, light and full of joy. She had no choices to make, no battles to fight. No memories to deal with, no shame, no misery. She wasn't herself anymore. She was someone else, someone who *belonged* to someone, and that someone would make all the decisions and let her float...

It switched again, and she slammed back into herself. Her eyes opened.

The light had changed. Still purple, still glowing, but colored with shooting stars of black and red, streaking across the bright screen of energy. Her blood raced through her veins, through her brain, faster and faster, and her tattoos screamed and tingled and writhed on her skin, searing through muscle and bone, setting off alarms in her soul.

Around the perimeter of the circle stood the ghosts, their clothing so familiar, their faces ones she'd seen before in paintings. The First Elders. The founders of the Church.

Controlled by herbs, neutered by magic, they stared at her with eyes that were nothing but blank white spaces. Their hands were clasped before them, their feet planted on the floor. They would witness her oath. They would bind her.

They would punish her if she broke the oath.

Holy *shit*.

Elder Thompson's voice boomed through the silence, an edge of hoarseness ruining the thick slide of it.

"Cesaria Putnam, this night we bind you. Bind you in loyalty to your Church, to Truth and Fact, to the power of the Church and the power of the earth. Do you accept this binding?"

Elder Griffin whispered something in her ear. She repeated it with a mouth that felt alien and strange, a voice rusty with nerves. "I request the parameters of the binding."

“The parameters of the binding are these. That you will not speak of your purpose to anyone but those authorized to know it. That you will not act with disloyalty against the Church. That what you hear of your purpose after the words of binding are spoken, and until they are retracted, will not be repeated by you to anyone but those authorized. That you will repeat them to those authorized when told to do so. Do you accept those parameters?”

Another whisper from Elder Griffin. “Who are those authorized?”

“Those authorized are Elder Thompson. Elder Griffin. The Grand Elder. Lauren Abrams, Inquisitor Third of the Black Squad. Those authorized will also be those names given to you by the aforementioned. Do you accept those parameters?”

“What are the penalties of breaking the binding?”

“The binding is unbreakable.”

“No binding is unbreakable.”

“If the binding is broken the penalty is thus. That the spirits of the First Elders will punish you. That the First Elders will remove you from your body and discard it. That you will be taken to the spirit prisons and left there until the First Elders shall determine you have been punished enough.”

She shivered. They weren't fucking around. But then she hadn't imagined they would be.

“Cesaria Putnam, do you accept these parameters?”

Purple swirled before her eyes; purple flames, purple energy. The First Elders, standing in silent disapproval around her, were translucent, purple glowing through them. Elder Thompson was simply a hulking black shape, barely visible in the vibrant light.

“Cesaria Putnam, do you accept these parameters?”

She licked her lips. “I do accept them.”

Elder Thompson muttered something; her arms lifted again. Her breath rattled in her chest, she knew what was coming and she didn't want to look, didn't want to see, but she couldn't help it her eyes wouldn't close—

Bright violet shrieked off the edge of the blade, just before Elder Griffin brought it down over her wrists in a quick, decisive slice.

Her nerves vibrated. Dimly she felt the pain, a cold prickle beneath the skin, but the magical control holding her kept the worst of it at bay.

She saw it though. Saw her blood burble up from the wounds like purple-black ink, like oil bubbling from a fault in the surface of the earth, and fall on the smoking pile of herbs at her feet. She hadn't seen either of the Elders move it but there it was, the purple flames flashing red when her blood hit it.

"Cesaria Putnam, you are bound. Bound to obey the strictures of this agreement. From this moment forward you will not speak of what you are told. Say you are bound."

"I am bound." The words felt sick and slimy in her mouth.

The First Elders came forward. One of them carried a blade, a real one not a spectral one, shining purple. Her tattoos screamed; her soul screamed.

The blade rose. The ghost—how did that work, she didn't know—he'd sliced their wrists. Each of the ghosts had a wound, a gaping mouth dribbling whitish ectoplasm.

Dripping it into her similar wounds. It stung and burned; it raced into her bloodstream, ran through her body, a blast of power and fear and icy death that chilled her even as it set her afire.

"Cesaria Putnam, you are bound. Bound to obey the commands of those aforementioned in speaking of what you are about to hear. Say you are bound."

"I am bound."

Dizziness swam up through her stomach, to her chest, to her head. The First Elders continued to invade her. Her blood continued to flow from her wounds, sizzling onto the fire below them like fat drippings onto firecans in the Market. She smelled it, blood mixed with the herbs, changing the scent into something like cinnamon and copper.

The fire rose, blinding purple. Rose at her feet and rose inside her. Sweat poured down her forehead and neck, between her breasts. Her bangs clung to her forehead.

"Cesaria Putnam, kneel."

Her knees gave way. She didn't feel them hit the floor but knew they had.

"*Richtaru bessiden amacha.*" Elder Thompson's voice rose, thick and strong above the roaring in her ears, the rasping desperation of her breath in her lungs. Smoke curled around her. It pressed against her power, twined with it, wrapped around her like a hot,

heavy wet blanket.

“By my power you are bound. By your power you are bound. By your blood and bones you are bound. By the power of the Church, by the power of the Truth, by the power of the First Elders and the earth, you are bound.”

Flames danced before her eyes, blurred with tears and stinging sweat. Too hot, it was too hot in there, she was losing too much blood...

“Let the binding be sealed!”

The flames leapt, scorching her face. Something poured over her wrists; it seared her skin, stunk of herbs. She looked at her arms, watched the thick reddish water pour over her, felt it enter her bloodstream and burn its way up her arms, to her chest, to her brain.

Her throat ached. She was screaming. Screaming so loud and so long she barely felt the binding lock into place when her wounds healed over. Barely felt something snap in her skull, in her body.

Barely. But she still felt it.

The fire died. Elder Thompson said something else, too quietly for her to hear. The energy lifted; the First Elders disappeared, leaving only the purple circle glowing around them.

Elder Griffin’s hands on her shoulder urged her to lean back, to rest against his chest. Her breath hitched; she didn’t want to cry, didn’t mean to, but she couldn’t help it, couldn’t seem to stop it. Thirty thousand dollars didn’t seem like enough for what she’d just given up. Even her faith in the Church, her trust in it, seemed to fade in light of what she’d lost.

The circle disappeared; fresh air flowed into where it had been, dispersing the smoke. Through the last purplish tendrils of it she saw Lauren Abrams reappear, smiling slightly, looking down at Chess on the floor like that was just the right place for her.

That was enough for Chess. She shrugged Elder Griffin’s hands away, pushed herself to a stand on legs that threatened to give out on her. She couldn’t do anything about the tears she’d already shed, about her sweat-soaked dress clinging to her body or wet hair clinging to her skull. But she could damn well face Lauren on her feet.

Lauren smiled slightly, looked her up and down. "You did well."

"She fought me." Elder Thompson sank into a chair, pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his heavy brow. "She almost broke out of the circle."

Lauren's eyebrows lifted; she looked at Chess with new interest. "Really."

"Cesaria is very strong," Elder Griffin said, and Chess had to fight not to look at him. Not to go to him and let him hold her again. She'd never—never had someone do that, not like that. Had never heard anyone talk about her with such pride in his voice.

That wasn't exactly true. One other person had done both of those things. But he never would again.

"Well." Lauren dusted her hands together, as though she needed to wash them of Elder Griffin's kind words. "Now that it's done, we have some things to discuss, don't we?"