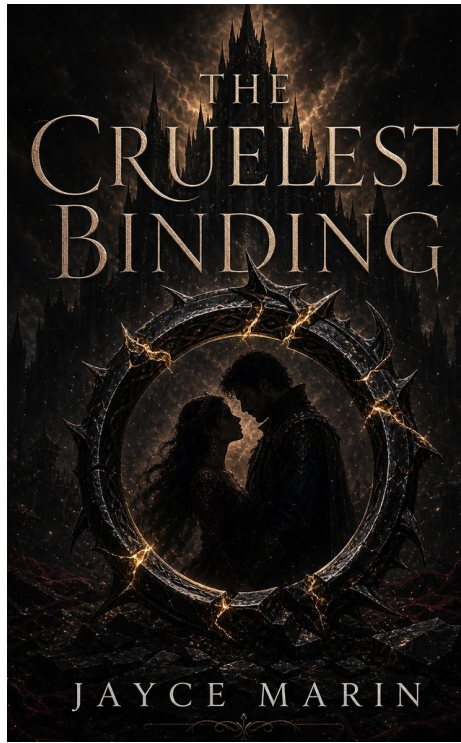




The Cruellest Binding

Jayce Marin

FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

This novel is intended for adult readers and contains captivity, coercive control, violence and explicit content.

Chapter One

The pestle pressed into the mortar, grinding rosemary into fine powder with a steady rhythm. Caitlín kept her head bowed and focused on the scrape of stone. The sharp scent cut through the sulfur and cinders in the Sunless Ward. For a moment, it reminded her of open fields, but there were no open fields here. There was only the King's rule, the polluted air, and the constant taste of ash.

The apothecary felt cramped around Caitlín. The narrow room had slanted walls, and glass jars caught the last of the weak light. The cold made breathing uncomfortable. Dampness rose through the floorboards, numbing her feet. Her skin warmed as she suppressed her magic. She held the mortar tightly, her knuckles pale, and forced herself not to use it. If anyone saw what she could do, she would be killed. Her safety depended on remaining unnoticed.

The shop door opened, letting in cold air. A man came in, his boots thick with gray, greasy soot from the mines. He coughed, a harsh, rattling sound that suggested damaged lungs. Caitlín didn't look up right away. She finished grinding the herbs with steady hands. She recognized that cough. Many people in Grimhold sounded that way now.

"The black lung is worse today," the man said. He leaned against the counter, his hands trembling. Fine, dark lines of ash-fever marked the skin of his neck. He smelled of wet coal and old sweat. "The soot is heavy. It coats the throat and makes swallowing difficult."

“The wind has shifted,” Caitlín said. Her voice was dry. “It’s bringing the draft down from the Citadel vents. It always makes the air thicker in the Ward.”

She slid her hand beneath the counter, fingers closing around a jar of mullein and lungwort. She kept her distance. Touch was dangerous. A single brush of skin might make the fire inside her react to the sickness in his lungs, trying to heal him. If she healed him, the Iron Guard would come for her before he finished his next breath. She measured out the tea, keeping her hands steady while her chest burned from the effort of holding back her magic.

“Boil this,” she said, pushing the tin toward him. “Inhale the steam before you drink it. It won’t cure the fever, but it will help you sleep.”

The man fumbled for tarnished coins, his eyes sunken with exhaustion. As he turned, the sound of iron boots filled the street. Caitlín went rigid, pestle clenched in her fist, every muscle urging her to run. The Iron Guard moved past the shop, black armor scraping stone.

She watched through grime-streaked glass as the armored men passed in precise formation. The King’s authority reached even here. Survival meant making herself appear ordinary: a woman grinding herbs and selling tea. The fire inside her had to stay hidden, or she would die for it.

The patrol moved farther down the street, and the sound of boots faded into the city’s mechanical noise. Caitlín exhaled, lungs raw, only then realizing she had been holding her breath. Sweat slicked her palms, and the mortar slipped slightly in her grip. She pulled her collar higher, hiding the

skin of her throat. Fear had shaped her life since the day they dragged her mother to Iron Square.

The bell rang sharply. Quick, nervous footsteps followed. Mirabel slipped in, her face partly covered by a soot-stained shawl, her eyes darting around the room. She moved tensely, ready to flee at the first sign of danger. Her hands were stained blue, proof she had worked through the tanneries and survived what should have killed her.

“You’re late,” Caitlín said, her voice softening as she moved to stoke the small stove. “I thought you might have been caught in the sweep near the docks.”

Mirabel pulled back her shawl, showing a jagged scar from her temple to her jaw, a mark left by the Iron Guard three winters ago. She dropped a bundle of wilted herbs on the counter.

“The Guard is everywhere today, Cait. They’re searching for something. Or someone. Vespera herself was seen near the main road, looking furious.”

Caitlín’s fingers tightened on the iron poker. “Vespera? Why would the Commander of the Guard come down to the Ward? There’s nothing here but ash and dying men.”

“They say the King is getting worse,” Mirabel whispered, leaning over the counter. Her eyes showed hope and fear. “They say the cracks are reaching his throat. That the Iron Oath is finally destroying him. People are talking, Cait. They think that if he falls, the darkness might end. They think we might finally see the sun again.”

Caitlín turned back to the stove, the heat of the embers reflecting in her eyes. “He is a tyrant. The Ashwraiths are

worse. Whatever he does up there is the only thing keeping them off the plains, and people forget that. Be careful what you wish for.”

“I wish for a world where I don’t have to breathe coal dust until I choke,” Mirabel snapped, her loyalty to the resistance clear in her voice. “I wish for a world where healers don’t have to hide in cellars and alleys. He’s cruel, Cait. He binds his soul to shadow and expects us to thank him for being controlled by it.”

Caitlín caught Mirabel’s blue-stained hands and held them tightly. She kept the fire contained, but even the barest touch was enough to stop Mirabel’s trembling. The floor was wet and cold beneath their feet. Their closeness was dangerous. One mistake could expose them both.

“He is cruel,” Caitlín agreed, her voice barely a whisper. “But he has the authority of the crown. Until that authority breaks, we must survive. Take the tinctures. Get back to the lower Ward before the curfew bells start.”

She pressed the vials into Mirabel’s palm. Mirabel’s anger faded, replaced by exhaustion. She squeezed Caitlín’s hand once, then vanished into the gray streets of the Ward. The silence that followed felt heavy and difficult to breathe through.

Caitlín stood alone. The shop felt smaller now. The rosemary scent was gone, replaced by the wet stink of stone and rot. She stared at her hands. They were steady, scarred, and ordinary in appearance. To most people, she was just another poor woman in the Ward. To the Citadel, she was useful, dangerous, and vulnerable. She retreated to the back,

sat on her narrow bed, and let the darkness settle around her.

The Citadel rose above the city, black and sharp against the sky. Her mother's final moments returned to her: the last flash of gold before the chains ended it. The grief in her chest had never left. She hid in the shadows, though her power came from light, because the world around her would destroy her if it knew what she was.

A wail drifted in from the plains. An Ashwraith cried somewhere beyond the city. Caitlín shuddered, heat pulsing wildly through her bones. She was trapped between using the power that could expose her and hiding until her secret disappeared with her.

She snuffed the tallow candle, but the darkness did not fully cover her. Her skin still glimmered faintly with gold, light showing through despite everything she did to hide it.

Keep reading

The Cruellest Binding is available now.

[Read the rest on Amazon](#)

jcmarinbooks.com