



# Cheat the Grave

*Vicki Pettersson*

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## **Cheat the Grave** Vicki Pettersson

Joanna Archer is working hard to put the painful events of her recent past behind, doing her best to embrace mortality after being superhuman.

But when she is stalked by a madman, she is forced to dive back into Vegas' underworld to piece together shocking discoveries about the mother who abandoned her, the lover who betrayed her, and the daughter who will follow in her footsteps. But in order to win back all those things, she must face off against a death-dealer who carries his soul in a blade... one that's screaming her name.

## **Cheat the Grave Details**

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# From Reader Review Cheat the Grave for online ebook

## Nairabell says

Joanna Archer has sacrificed her powers to save the life of a child and embraced her newfound mortality. Banished from her troop of zodiac warriors, she finds herself surrounded by enemies with only her alias of Olivia Archer to fall back on. But the prophecies that surround Joanna haven't disappeared with her powers, and she finds herself pursued by an insane and unstoppable killer in a world where black and white have blended into shades of grey. Only those she once saw as foes may be able to help her, but Joanna will have to change her worldview entirely to be able to accept their aid.

Well after book four (City of Souls) I honestly didn't know where Joanna's story could go next. She completely sacrificed all her powers and ended up not only as a regular mortal human, but a regular mortal human stuck in the body of her dead sister. I said in my review of City of Souls that the series could have easily ended there, but having read this I'm so glad it didn't. This book has redefined the series, giving it new life and a massively massive twist at the end of the book which shocked the heck out of me (I really did NOT see that one coming, but with hindsight it actually makes a lot of sense). It has kept the fast pace and pretty constant action of the previous books which is great, although it makes the book hard to put down.

There's quite a few new characters in this book, although the old zodiac troop appear occasionally and Suzanne and Cher have larger roles to make up for their absence. Thankfully Joanna doesn't have a breakdown over Hunter's choice to go after his wife in Midheaven in the last book, and his reasons for doing so become very clear. The new characters, especially Carlos and Io are really well developed, and having Mackie (yep - the one from Midheaven) as the main bad guy was a great choice as he was already known to the reader in a book that covers a lot of new ground.

There are some storylines still to be continued - like Hunter's and Zoe (Joanna's mother), not to mention what Joanna herself will do next or what will happen with the last cliffhanger that appears in the last few pages. Book 6 (The Neon Graveyard) is out at the end of next May, and I personally can't wait.

Plot: 10/10

Characters: 10/10

Ending: 10/10

Enjoyment: 10/10

Cover: 9/10

Overall: 49/50

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## Darcy says

I had a tough time with this book which is unusual for me with this series. I feel for Jo and what has happened to her. Along the way she has learned so much about herself, her heritage, and her place in the world. But it seems like whatever semi good thing that happens in her life she is destined to lose, this time around she is dealing with her loss of identity and the loss of the new family she created for herself within the troop.

I find the troop to be very fickle, if you can't live up to their (read Warren's) high standard you tend to end up out and on your own. This seemed to cause Jo to be adrift. I thought it was great when Jo finally found a path that would lead her back to her strong self.

I look forward to seeing where the revelations in this book take us.

On a side note, you do have to question your life and what is going on in it when you give the catering staff a break to hide weapons around the room for quick access when you know the wedding you will be attending as a bridesmaid will very quickly go to hell in a hand basket.

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## **Jackie says**

Joanna Archer is now totally mortal, neither Light nor Shadow but an independent Gray who finds new allies in the most unlikely way imaginable who restore her faith in herself as well as come to her aid in this her time of greatest need...

After the year long break between book 4 City of Souls and Cheat The Grave it was nice to return to the adventures of Joanna Archer. This book was darker, more emotional and absolutely worth the years wait as once the "action" got underway there were so many things going on you had to keep reading to see what happened next. Joanna is fully into her persona of "Olivia" in the beginning, dealing with the board members of her father's company after his death and helping her best friend Cher throw the wedding of the century for Cher's stepmother Suzanne. The only problem is that since Jo is now fully mortal she has been disowned by the agents of Light and one of the agents of Shadow who has escaped Midheaven is gunning for her, so while Jo has to somehow stay in the limelight she also has to stay alive! During this whole book there are some revelations along the way that will blow the readers mind, you never see most of it coming and even if you think you know what is going to happen the author still manages to surprise you with what really occurs! This book has some very interesting indications with all it's little twists and turns in the plot of where the author is taking the series next. We are allowed glimpses of a stronger, more realistic heroine rising from the ashes of the superheroine that Joanna once was! The personal glimpses that we are given into what is happening with her relationship with Hunter/Jaden Jacks are at times heartbreaking and yet at the same time a promise that maybe Joanna will get her HEA at some point after all.. The new characters introduced in the Gray Agents have livened up the series once again and the fight scenes between the two Tulpa's are epic! By the end of the book you will really be unhappy that it will be a 6 month long wait for book #6 release date The Neon Graveyard in June of 2011!

There is a part of me that is hoping that the series lasts for a few more books and a part of me that is hoping that book 6 is the finish line, I am just not sure how much more "fresh material" the author can come up with as it truly seems to me that the story is winding down to the end.

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## **Kim says**

PLEASE NOTE: This review will contain spoilers from the earlier books in the series.

I know a lot of people were quite disappointed with the direction this series has taken in recent installments, particularly with the loss of Joanna's powers.\* I understand where they're coming from, but I withheld judgment until I could see where Pettersson was going. For me, the greatest strength of the series has always

been its originality, specifically that it shied away both from paranormal staples such as vampires and the fey and from traditional European mythology, instead using the zodiac and Tibetan myth. And since most paranormal fiction focuses on the supernaturally gifted hero/ine, how much more original is it to make the heroine mortal instead? So while my heart broke when Joanna gave up her powers in book four, she's a real survivor, and I was anxious to see what she could still do.

Which turns out to be quite a lot. In *Cheat the Grave*, Joanna has completely broken with the Light and joined up with rogue agents calling themselves the Grays, many of whom were formerly allied with the Shadow. She has been betrayed by Warren, the leader of the Light, Midheaven now owns 2/3rds of her soul, and her beloved Hunter is apparently lost to her. So what better time to try and take down her birth father, the immortal Tulpa? It's a good thing even mortal Joanna has a few tricks up her sleeve.

I liked this book, didn't love it, though it definitely piqued my interest in the next book. Unfortunately, *Cheat the Grave* did more to interest me in its successor than to keep interested in what I was currently reading. Although it's book 5 in the series, in some ways *Cheat the Grave* felt like the second book in a trilogy, not tying up loose ends so much as establishing the direction Joanna's future adventures will go. The relationship between Joanna and Hunter has not been repaired, but revelations were made that make its future resolution seem possible, if Pettersson should go that way. The Light has dismissed a Power-less Joanna as a worthless Joanna, and *Cheat the Grave* clearly establishes that she is not. However, except for the awesome denouement, this novel seems curiously lacking in action, which is problematic because a. the series has probably attracted readers due to how action-packed it is and b. it sends the message that as a mortal, Joanna can't kick as much butt. I believe we'll come to find out that's not the case.

One of the great difficulties in creating an original fantasy world is that sometimes there's a thin line separating "original" from "just plain weird." For me, Pettersson's Midheaven was right on that line, and my least favorite parts of the novel were when Joanna visited in her dreams. I just feel like I don't "get" Midheaven, and I want it to give Joanna back her two thirds of a soul. On the other hand, I really love the idea of the "Grays", and enjoyed getting furious at the Light, who rejected Joanna for losing her powers (to save a child, and maybe the city itself). The Shadow didn't get any kinder or gentler, but the Light has clearly been sullied, and Joanna is the only character whose morality I trust.

To sum up, I recommend this series as a whole, particularly if you're looking for an original take on urban fantasy, and *Cheat the Grave* is a perfectly respectable installment in the series. I hope the next book has the fireworks I was looking for in this one, but in any case, I'll be reading to see where Joanna goes next.

\*The author posted on facebook that one of her readers hated book four so much she wanted to burn the first three books in the series. That's taking it way too far!

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## **Karen says**

I discovered among my sister's borrowed books Vicki Pettersson. I love reading new authors but more than that- I love originality. I found that in the Zodiac Series. From the world building to the writing to the super hero soldiers themselves, it all reeked of originality. I was hooked from book one, page one, hell sentence one. Naturally, after finishing the series thus far, I felt compelled to review. So here it is.

The Signs of the Zodiac Series by Vicki Pettersson

“Before you plan your next trip to Vegas, you might want to answer...

Are you Light? Or are you Shadow? Because there's another world behind the bright lights and nonstop action of Sin city ... one where Light and Shadow wage an immortal war for supremacy.

But the eternal battle has reached the tipping point, and only one person can change the future – casino heiress, photographer, and vigilante: Joanna Archer.

And no one knows the darkness within better than she does.”

Who is Joanna Archer? Victim, survivor, photographer, vigilante, heiress, socialite, superhero- Yes. Joanna, Jo, Jo-Jo-, Olivia, Livy-girl, Ms. Archer, the Kairos, the Archer-Yes. Daughter, sister, soldier, leader, followers, mother, everyone, and no one- Yes. Joanna is such a complex character, one living in both the shadow and light. Everyone wants her dead. Everyone wants a piece of her. And Joanna, well she's only beginning to have a clue to what she wants.

All her life Joanna has known loss. Her mother abandoned her as a child and then she was dutifully despised and ignored by her so-called father. She has sought violence and death in the streets of Sin City. And you what they say, if you knock long enough the devil will answer the door. That door swung wide open to Joanna. In a very short span of time, she lost her sister, entered a group of super beings known as Zodiac Troop 175, and became her dead sister as a cover identity. And that was only the beginning.

Joanna fights the good fight or so she thinks fulfilling the first sign of the zodiac- the unveiling of the Kairos, the second sign, a plague, and the third sign the awakening of the Kairos' dormant side. By the fourth sign, Joanna thinks she may have a chance at some normalcy. Maybe she can hang with friends or fall in love like any other girl. Nope. Joanna must enter a new world known as Midheaven. A fantastical place run by amazonessque women that make the shadows look tame. She has her mission and if she fails, the fourth sign will not happen and all will be lost. Just a typical day for one Joanna Archer. During the course of the fifth sign, we see Joanna waiver. We see her frail and lost both physically and emotionally. She is once again abandoned and betrayed. She has no stability. Her lover is disloyal and her troop leaves her defenseless. This is a book of questions. What is right and wrong? What does she have to live for? Is she a rainbow or just plain grey? What are her lover's real motives and are they meant to be? Some questions are answered and others are raised. But, by the end, Joanna Archer knows one thing, she's pissed and if she's going down, she's going down swinging.

This may not be a series of HEA's, but it is a gritty kick-ass urban fantasy. The world building is phenomenal and only gets better in each book. The writing is seamless with engrossing characters that have you wanting/demanding/needing more. Each book leaves the reader eager for the next rollercoaster ride. In an age of vampires and werewolves, Pettersson's superheroes pack a punch that cannot and will not be ignored.

Here are the books in order and Vicki's site: <http://www.vickipettersson.com/home.html>

- The Scent of Shadows: The First Sign of the Zodiac
- The Taste of Night: The Second Sign of the Zodiac
- The Touch of Twilight: The Third Sign of the Zodiac
- City of Souls: The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac
- Cheat the Grave: The Fifth Sign of the Zodiac
- Neon Graveyard: The Sixth Sign of the Zodiac (May 31st 2011)

`Happy Reading!

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## **Brandi says**

Some authors seem to loose their touch the further into the series they go. Not true of this lady! She threw in the most beautiful plot twist semi near the end of this book. Oh, it was glorious! To say anything would give it away. Suffice to say that her books get better as the series goes, which is a nice change.

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## **Susi says**

I was so thrilled to receive this book s an ARC and I HAD to start it ASAP. After reading the first few pages I started to remember all the things that happened in the last book. I think this is one of the saddest urban fantasies I ever read. I'm not such a Urban Fantasy addict so that probably doesn't say much or it could be because I'm feeling Joanna's pain like my own. Ms. Pettersson really knows how to make her heroine believable.

I loved that Jo is not perfect- she has flaws but I like her, most of the time. Sometimes she's way to stubborn and a bit immature but her development since book one (The Scent of Shadows) is strongly visible in this book. She's hurt- big time but she fights to keep going. She just doesn't want to give up and I I really felt for Joanna and my heart broke every ten pages or so for the first part of the book. The beginning is so dark and I hoped for Joanna's and my own sake that something good or at least something not bad happens to her. She still is strong but you can feel that she would resign if all this stuff would happen to her any longer.

The plot in Cheat the Grave is a thrilling ride with many twists and turns. I was hooked after the first few pages and I couldn't put this book down for more than the time I needed to dry my tears. I loved how new revelations were woven into the story and I had to gasp more than once. I wanted to scream at the characters often and sometimes I had the deep urge to slap them.

The bad guys are still shudder -worth and surprisingly the good guys aren't any better. That's probably a reason for the overall dark feel of this book, too. We discover a new fraction and they are the ones that seem to be the "sanest" in this world. I enjoyed to learn more about these characters and their stories were touching or bizarre, depending on the character but they always fit into the big picture. They gave the world more depth and answered some of the question I had from the start.

As you can see this book really grabbed me. I can't wait to read the next book and I want a HEA for Joanne with all my heart. A great new addition to the Signs of the Zodiac series and one you shouldn't miss. Thrilling from the start and full of emotion. Cheat the Grave answers many of your questions but it also brings new mysteries that need solving. I, for my part can't wait to get my hands on the next book.

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## **Kathy says**

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted!

I strongly recommend you read the previous books in the series (The Scent of Shadows The First Sign of the Zodiac, The Taste of Night The Second Sign of the Zodiac, The Touch Of Twilight, The Third Sign of the Zodiac and City of Souls and check-out from the library, the short story "the Harvest" in the Holidays Are Hell anthology) prior to reading this book.

It's nice to take a break from the usual vamps and demons and to curl up with a book that is one of the most creative series I have ever read! This series just keeps getting better and better. If you have been a Joanna Archer fan but were disappointed in the last couple of installments, it's time to come back; major secrets are revealed! For every secret revealed the plot grows thicker and thicker. In the last installment Joanna was budding into a mature adult, in this installment she is a full grown women; with no signs of the reckless, brattiness that grew so tiresome. The action was plentiful and the plot was explosive! I didn't think it was possible to top the last installment but Vicki pulled it off and this installment left me salivating for more.

I highly recommend this book to fellow dark urban fantasy readers and can't wait for the next book and also Vicki Pettersson's short story in DARK AND STORMY NIGHTS "Shifting Star" due out 7/20/10.

I also recommend:

Song of Scarabaeus

Dead, Undead, or Somewhere in Between

Master of None

Black and White (Icarus Project, Book 1)

The Mage in Black (Sabina Kane)

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## **Tiffany Danner says**

I have a confession, I am a VPeep, yes that's right. I am a Vicki Pettersson fangirl. It's partly because she is a Vegas girl and I love that connection in her stories, but also because she writes dark urban fantasy and I love it. She isn't afraid to torture her characters or break the rules for the sake of the story. The last book in the series was shocking and turned the series upside down on its head. The main character, Joanna, was forever changed to the point that many thought the series was over with.. Yet, the series isn't over and Pettersson returns to torture us, and Joanna, in the fifth installment of the Signs of the Zodiac series, Cheat the Grave.

The Signs of the Zodiac series feature not vampires, or werewolves, or any other typical supernatural character.... but instead modern super heroes. The world is made up of Agents of Light and Shadow, battling to keep the world balanced with the events being recorded in comic books, known to the agents as manuals. Our main protagonist is Joanna, an Agent of Light, mostly. Her mother was Zoe Archer, the Sagittarius Agent of Light while her father was the Tulpa, the evil genius in control of the Shadow Agents in Las Vegas.

Joanna Archer is tough, hard, bitter, angry, battle worn, and alone. Abandoned by her mother and practically disowned by her assumed father, she started off this series all of these things and more. When I read the first book I wondered where she could possibly go from there? Over the last 4 books she has found companionship and family through her troop and some unexpectedly inherited friends and family. She has



been trained to be a deadly weapon, but she has also softened in her judgment and acceptance of those around her. She lets people into her life and get to know her and becomes a better character because of it. Yet letting people in often means getting hurt, and Joanna is no exception. Her troop has abandoned her, her lover betrayed her....she is once again alone and wondering what she has left to live for.

Cheat the Grave gives us a rare look at our super heroine weak and vulnerable. Joanna is wallowing in self pity and unsure of where she belongs. This part of the book was the hardest part for me to read, I didn't enjoy it but I know it was necessary and real. I wanted to smack Jo upside the head and tell her to snap out of it – she was a tough kick ass chick, not some mokey do nothing! As a side effect, this section was the slowest for me to read and I found myself wishing things were moving a bit faster.

Things picked up and the story shined for me as new characters were introduced to Joanna's world. Cast out of the Light and not willing to be Shadow, Jo is looking for some place to belong. Rogue agents, independents no longer light or shadow, make themselves known to her and she is forced to question her beliefs about light and dark. Can there be Gray and is she willing to be part of it? The Gray Agents are all interesting characters that will make you smile, Carlos especially. Even Zoe Archer makes an appearance, and man she kicks some serious ass.

Cheat the Grave teases us mercilessly through Jo and Hunter's relationship, bringing to light new facts and background information. The connection between the two is as strong as ever and I can't wait to see what is in store in book 6. The end of this one left me with hope for them, but Vicki Pettersson is known for taking that hope and stomping on it while laughing maniacally.

In the end, Cheat the Grave is another great installment in the series, featuring a few "oh my god no way" moments you don't want to miss. It may have been a bit slow moving at times but the story telling and world building more than make up for it. Joanna Archer is at her limits and this book just pushes her harder, asking what will she do? What is she really made of? In this gritty dirty urban fantasy there are no happy endings, but if you are looking for great story telling and riveting character growth, this one is for you.

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### **Alison says**

I really like Vicki Pettersson, and I think I like her more as the series goes on. Her character shows growth and change, she's strong and interesting, and the evolution of her powers and the different relationships keeps things interesting, as does the addition of different dimensions and worlds. She's not afraid to kill characters off, either. I think this is a pretty underappreciated series if you like urban fantasy with strong female leads.

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### **Regina De Los Reyes says**

3.5 stars. The fifth installment in the Signs of the Zodiac series was an enjoyable adventure. Jo Archer was kicked out of the troop last book for saving a Changeling, she lost all of her powers and is now a mortal. Her former friends and lover have turned their backs on her but she finds that that life is not behind her. The Tulpa is still around hell bent on revenge and destruction, a homicidal maniac is after her from MidHeaven and she meets a band of Grays who were once lights and darks and are now Rogues. They take her in and help her gain the necessary tools to take her life back how she wants it. Some great adventure and action..some parts irritating in the way she acted like a spoiled brat and some surprises in the end.

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## **Jennifer says**

I loved this book. This might have been the best of the Zodiac. Olivia/Joanna has just been thrown out of the Zodiac Light troop. She has to find a way to cope with the loss of her powers, her friends, her lover, and her life as she knew it (twice). The Archer is no more. She's no longer allowed to converse with any of the Zodiac troop and she still has to evade the ever probing Tulpa. She finds herself stalked by a crazed killer from another dimension, but with no one to turn to for help, she is on her own. Or is she? She receives messages from someone and conduits to help her along the way. The beautiful Solange, Hunter's wife, is after her too. Joanna has no where she can hide. When a former Shadow troop catches up with her, she never figures it might be him that saves her life. She's left with the reality that everything she knew might be lie... again. With her life hanging in the balance she finds that her long lost mother has been in the background the whole time, but will she be there in the end when Jo needs her most? Pettersson has a hit with this series. Each book deepens the pull to read them. I look forward to the next book and cannot wait to read it.

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## **Jerome says**

If I hadn't invested so much time in this series I would stop now. Mind blowing how so many people like this series.

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## **Larissa says**

4&1/2 out of 5 stars!

\*Contain spoilers, if you haven't read the previous books in the series!

There are some series that just catch you by surprise and before you know it, you are in love, counting the days for the next installment and trolling any site or forum that discusses it.

That was what happened for me when I started reading The Sign of the Zodiac series by Vicki Pettersson. I found out about it by chance and one book in, I was hooked for good and I don't want to let it go.

Joanna has been a tough chick and a fighter ever since an attack at an early age, changed her life. When she turned 25 she found out that she was not just a girl, but actually a superhero, part of a matriarchal world and society where Light and Shadow have been in war for too long to count. Each city has a troop representing each side of this battle, and each side's troop has 12 member/spots to be filled, representing the 12 signs of the zodiac.

Their quests, fights and adventures are recorded in comic books and the awareness of children and teens is what keep them alive and strong. Giving something a name, focusing your thought and beliefs into someone or something, give it strength and power.

Joanna is the Archer, the representative of the Sagittarius sign, but she is also daughter of the former Archer of the Light and of a member of the Shadows. That legacy has been foretold and she is believed to be the

Kairos, a person who will have both Light and Shadows within and will bring forth portents, signs that will tip the balance in this long lasting war to either the Good or the Bad.

I LOVE the world Vicki has created, it is rich, interesting, fun, full of action and original. I was blown away with this new Installment of one of my favorite series out there.

I missed Joanna so much and I am happy to have her back. In Cheat The Grave, Joanna is mortal and dealing with her powerless state the best way she knows how. She has sacrificed a lot for her beliefs and her former friends and allies have turned their back on her. However, Joanna tries to move on with her life, away from the paranormal world, when a terrible foe shows up, worse then ever, hungry for her flesh, bones and soul.

What's a girl to do when all that she left behind gives chase and doesn't want to let her go? Fight with tooth and nails and learn to deal with new surprises and new way of seeing the world, not so much as Light and Shadows, but as Gray and full of more possibilities she had thought before.

"I was Joanna Archer, a mortal with some extra benefits. I had a family of chose friends, who had also chosen me. I was gray, an amalgam of light and shadow, which made me both dawn and dust, and in the world of the Zodiac, that was where the web between reality and its flip side was at its thinnest... and open to pure possibility."

The only down side was that I missed the superhero Joanna, but my disappointment was short lived, because Joanna Archer is still the same tough chick she has ever been, and even though it took her a while to realize that, the self discovery was interesting.

Cheat The Grave is the perfect addition to The Sign of The Zodiac series, changed leading lady, but full of non-stop action. heart breaking moments and a fast-paced story that will keep you on the edge from beginning to end. Urban Fantasy at its best! If you haven't read Pettersson's series, I seriously hope you have a good excuse for it!

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## Christine says

OMG! How long am I going to have to wait for book 6?? Torture!

So much happens in this book, crazy revelations and new mysteries to anticipate. After completely flooring me with the end of book 4 I was uncertain of how it would be possible to keep going with this series without coming up with a convenient plot device to give Jo her powers back. Well, Joanna learns how to keep fighting and embrace herself as she is and it's great. This book is so dark and sad in parts though. It's lacking the comic relief of the comicbook groupies and Hunter is not an active character for most of the book. Can't wait to see what happens next, love the idea of a vagabond gray troop (they should get their own spin-off comic!). I am a little more hopeful of a HEA for Hunter and Joanna after this book, yay! Don't crush me with book 6 like you did with book 4 Vicki!

Just one complaint--- Um, that "Spanish" that Carlos was speaking has to go. I guess it's mostly Mexican slang since Spanish is my native language and I didn't recognize half of the words he said. What was with the "mon" though?! He's Mexican, not Jamaican dude.

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## Shelley says

Las Vegas socialite and otherworldly avenger Joanna (Olivia) Archer gave up everything when she embraced mortality—abandoning her powers and altering her destiny to save a child and a city. Now her former allies are her enemies and her enemies have nothing to fear.

Yet still she is bound to a prophecy that condemns her to roam a nightmare landscape that ordinary humans cannot see and dare not enter. And a beast is on her trail—an insane killer blinded by bloodlust, who's determined to rip much more from Joanna than merely her now-fragile life. Survival is no longer an option in this dark realm where good and evil have blurred into confusing shades of gray—unless she can gather together an army of onetime foes and destroy everything she once believed in.

**\*\*Review\*\*** The Signs of the Zodiac series feature Agents of Light and Shadow, battling to keep the world balanced with the events being recorded in comic books, known to the agents as manuals. This series just happens to be told in the city of Las Vegas, the city of sin.

Our main protagonist is Joanna, an Agent of Light, mostly. Her mother was Zoe Archer, the Sagittarius Agent of Light while her father was the Tulpa, the evil genius in control of the Shadow Agents in Las Vegas.

In a strange sequence of events, Joanna learns that her daughter is alive and well, and living with an adopted mother and father to keep her safe from both sides. Joanna thought she had lost her prior to the events surrounding the first book in this series.

Her mother, Zoe, is actually alive, and was living as Suzanne, Olivia's best friend's mother. (Confused yet?) Suzanne is getting married to a rich Saudi Prince who isn't what he seems to be.

Joanna (Olivia's) father is dead, and now she controls his holdings and she has to continue to hide her identity from the evil that was her father's empire, including the Tulpa. Joanna's one true friend is actually from Olivia's life; Cher.

We are also introduced to a whole new set of characters, the Rogues, who are agents neither of Shadow nor Light, but Gray, and yes, the prophecy is still in place and there's nothing she can do to change it.

I'm still waiting for the Light Troop to dump Warren like yesterday's garbage, so, I'll have to stay tuned for the next book in the series, Neon Graveyard, to come out in May 2011.

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## Fangs for the Fantasy says

To be honest, I have been struggling with this series. It started off wonderfully engaging, with a world that was absolutely unique in urban fantasy, and then somewhere along the way, it seemed to lose focus, that is until Cheat the Grave. This book reminded me of why I fell in love with the Zodiac books to begin with.

Now that Joanna/Olivia is mortal, the forces of light see her as useless, and to make matters worse, Solange has sent Mackie the piano player from Midheaven to kill her. If the Tulpa and the shadow hunters figure out

who she really is, they will kill her. Everywhere she turns, someone wants her dead except for the rogue agents (the greys). Somehow she must protect the mortals she loves, and chief among her concerns is stopping Suzanne from marrying someone she suspects has nefarious intent.

The fifth sign of the zodiac was filled with the world building that the last two books lacked. We learn more about why Hunter was such a threat to Warren, and a bit about Warren's motivations. He was still not painted as a sympathetic person, and in fact -- we understand even more clearly that he is no different from the Tulpa. Warren only saw himself as better, because he is fighting on the side of the Light, but if you are willing to sacrifice people, erase memories, and manipulate lives for a single minded purpose, does it really matter what the goal is?

Cheat the Grave was far more introspective than any other book in the zodiac series thus far. It was masterfully written, and unlike many books in this genre, Olivia/Joanna continues to be likeable. Every angst filled emotion that she had was justified. Her entire life had been taken from her and when she finally felt that she was on secure footing, everything that she knew was ripped from her again. She was a woman trying to understand the world around her, and for the very first time not following orders but deciding for herself what her goals were and what would make her happy.

This book was all about agency in it's truest sense. The Greys wanted the chance to settle down and not to be actively hunted by both sides and this determination caused Joanna/Olivia to understand that the binary approach to life i.e warriors of life vs Shadow warriors, was not really balance, and that it would not ever lead to real happiness.

Read more

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## The Flooze says

**\*\*2.5\*\***

Don't you hate it when you've decided to drop a series...and then the author flings such crazy plot twists at you that you're forced to say, "Ohhh, *fine*! I'll read one more."

::grumblegrumble::

That's what Pettersson keeps doing to me.

In a welcome departure from the typical paranormal, Signs of the Zodiac is based on **astrology and Tibetan myth**. That's point one in its favor. Point two is that it revolves around a group of **superhero-type characters whose powers are reliant upon human belief**. The concept that belief breeds strength and fosters existence is one that appeals to me. (I've even joked that the whole UF genre is a devious fae plot to shore up their existence. That's my conspiracy theory and I'm stickin' to it.)

So, with a relatively original foundation and a theme that pleases, what's the problem? **Bloated, self-conscious prose**, for a start. Pettersson tries too hard to infuse her UF with poetic descriptions. Instead of elevating her writing, she's weighing it down with unrealistic statements and an **overabundance of conflicting similes** (see my status updates). Too often the action stalls out as we're treated to Joanna Archer's puffed up ruminations, prompting me to ask: **"Who talks/thinks like this?"**

In turn, the world building suffers. **While we're stuck in Joanna's self-pitying, philosophical mindscape, there's an entire paranormal playing field crying out for attention.** Five books later and I'm still trying to grasp the parameters of the agents' powers, still trying to understand their purpose, *still* trying to figure out how an alternate reality fits in. **It reminds me of my issues with Jeanine Frost - great ideas, but they're woefully ill-defined and bordering on arbitrary.**

Then why do I keep reading? Originally, it was my hope that the rarely explored mythological/astrological concepts would eventually pay off. **Perhaps Pettersson expects me to be better versed in these ideas before approaching her series, but it's my firm belief that I shouldn't have to research *before* entering a UF world. The text itself should serve as a primer.** Abandoning that hope two books ago, I decided to give up.

But, but! **Pettersson has this habit of filling the last third of her books with invigorating action scenes and dazzling revelations.** It's a bit of a cheat. Book four ended with a game-changing event that made me question how in the hell she'd keep it all going. *Cheat the Grave* wraps up with significant turmoil, startling discoveries, and the promise of battle. Frustrating, because although I don't want to endure another tedious bout of Joanna-the-Philosophical-Martyr, **the sudden plot twists beg me to suck it up and soldier on.** And so I shall. Glutton for punishment - that's me.

*P.S. If Vincent is old school Bronx, I'm the Queen of Sheba. Don't assign your characters distinct labels if you can't support it. One "Nah, man!" does not an accent make.*

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## Gwen Mitchell says

Fans of this series will be happy to know that Pettersson successfully brings Joanna back from the devastation that left us hanging almost a year ago. Be warned – this review contains some spoilers, for the series and the fifth installment.

When we last left Joanna/Olivia Archer, all hope seemed lost – along with her superpowers, her troop, the man she loved, and quite nearly her life. But life goes on, and the story picks up with a very human (and understandably bitter) Jo joining in the festivities surrounding the wedding of the century. Suzanne, the stepmother of Olivia's best friend, is marrying a textile mogul and Olivia's hotel/casino is putting on the whole affair.

After months of rehab, Jo has come to terms with her new mortality. But while her physical wounds have healed, the scars on her heart and spirit still fester just below the surface. Moving on with her new human life becomes impossible when an old enemy (crazy Mackie, the creepy piano player from Midheaven) has been cut loose to finish her off. Without her powers or the support of her ex-allies in the troop of Light, Joanna is a sitting duck. Yet help comes from the most unlikely places, including former agent of Shadow, Harlan Tripp – also escaped from Midheaven.

While running from her life and seeking the answers to why she's still a target in immortal power-ball, Joanna unwittingly fulfills the fifth sign of the Zodiac: she joins both Light and Shadow in a troop of rogue agents determined to follow and protect the Kairos (despite her mortal status) and shift the balance of power in the Las Vegas valley.

The first question on my mind when I picked up this book was whether or not Joanna's ex-lover, Hunter Lorenzo (a.k.a. Jaden Jacks) was going to make an appearance. Let's get this out in the open right now – he does. In an effort to remain as spoiler-free as possible, let me just say that enough of the story was dedicated to this subplot that we better understand Hunter's motivation for betraying Jo. I'm a sucker for angst, and Pettersson does it well, but by the end of the story, Joanna is determined to find a way to free him from Midheaven, and I was definitely on board with that plan.

A few other surprises are in store in Cheat the Grave, including the long-awaited introduction of Zoe Archer – Joanna's mother, who's been helping her from the sidelines for several books – as well as the deaths of a couple of important characters. The overall feel of this story was heavier and darker, due both to Joanna's grim outlook and the lack of any real romance subplot. In fact, a good portion of the book is dedicated to Joanna accepting and grieving her losses. Also missing is the normal relief provided by scenes in the comic book store, or during training with the other agents. This book is a run for Joanna's life, and even the normally vacant blond entourage attached to Olivia is unexpectedly deep and touching...right before they start stuffing their bras with toilet paper.

Perhaps my favorite layer of the story is the theme focused on how deceiving appearances can be. This is something Pettersson has touched on before, but she really nailed it this time. No one in this story is who you expect them to be. Enemies are allies. Allies are enemies. The weak are strong. The invincible fall. And in the middle of it all stands Joanna Archer – not Shadow or Light, human or hero – just a survivor.

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## **Dren says**

If you haven't read this series, please note that while I don't write spoilers about the current storyline, there may be details from previous books noted below.

Heroine Joanna Archer returns in the fifth installment of the Signs of the Zodiac series, Cheat the Grave and its hands down one the best books in the series. The story picks up shortly after the events that occurred in book 4, City of Souls and Joanna is now human. No more super human skills. No more super healing. Her destiny is over. Or is it? What could happen next? Everything!

Hunted by her enemies, targeted by her former friends, Joanna attempts to make sense of her life now that she no longer has a pre-ordained destiny to follow. But she's running out of time as an old killer hunts her down to repay a debt that's owed – in her blood.

I gave Cheat the Grave 5 stars because I received nearly ALL of the answers to the questions that were driving me insane in the previous books. I even received confirmation on the biggest question of the ALL! But you've gotta read it – I'm not telling.

Action, murder, mayhem, surprise after surprise and the ultimate showdown – all wrapped up in a single book. Kudos to Vicki Pettersson for keeping book 5 as exciting as the first!

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