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Chapter 27 Blood and Ink Chapter Twenty-Seven

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The room smelled of copper, ink, and old paper. Elara Voss sat at the center of a circle of candles, her hands pressed flat against the cold stone floor, and she was bleeding from the nose for the third time this week. The blood ran down her upper lip and tasted exactly the way it always tasted, like pennies and regret, and she did not wipe it away because the moment she broke the circle she would have to start the ritual from the beginning and she could not afford to start from the beginning because the beginning took three hours and the library closed at midnight and the librarian was already suspicious of her and suspicion was the thing that ended careers in the Archive of Forbidden Texts faster than anything else except death.

The Archive of Forbidden Texts was not a metaphor. It was a literal building in the city of Ashmoor, a stone structure with no windows and a door that only opened when the right people knocked in the right way, and Elara had been the right people for exactly six months, ever since her mentor disappeared and left her the key and the debt and the nosebleeds. The key was a brass thing shaped like a raven's feather. The debt was written in her own handwriting on parchment that burned when she tried to read it twice. The nosebleeds were the interest.

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and smeared the blood across the chalk sigil she had drawn on the floor. The sigil was supposed to protect her from the spirit she was trying to contact, a spirit that had been bound to the archive's collection of cursed manuscripts for three hundred years and was not happy about being disturbed. The spirit was not happy about being bound either, but Elara was not in the business of negotiating with spirits who had killed twenty people and she was not in the business of being polite to spirits who had killed twenty people either.

The candles flickered. The temperature dropped. The air smelled like rain and graveyard dirt and something else, something sweet and rotten, something that Elara had smelled once before when she was twelve and her grandmother died and the doctor said it was the smell of the body beginning to forget how to be alive.

She opened her eyes and looked at the book she was holding. The book was bound in human skin and the skin was still warm and the book was still breathing and Elara was still bleeding and none of this was normal but none of this was the worst thing she had seen this week and the worst thing she had seen this week was still sitting in her apartment three blocks away with a knife in its hand and a smile that was too many teeth and too many years and too much hunger.

The spirit was speaking now. The spirit was speaking in a language that Elara did not know but her tongue was translating anyway and her bones were translating and her blood was translating and she was not asking how or why because asking how or why was the kind of question that opened doors she could not close and she was already standing in a room she could not leave and the only way out was through the ritual and the ritual was bleeding her dry and she was not asking how or why because she was dying and she was not asking how or why because she was dying and she was not asking how or why because she was dying.

The spirit was dying too. The spirit was dying because Elara was reading the wrong page and the wrong page was the page that the spirit had been bound to protect and the