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The Ember Codex

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Introduction

In the divided kingdom of Aldraen, nothing is more dangerous—or more forbidden—than magic. It is not only outlawed; it is feared, vilified, driven into the cracks between shattered cities by the iron fist of the ruling Voryn regime. Throughout the winding streets of Dawnspire and the mist-wreathed forests beyond, the stories of magic are treated as half-remembered nightmares or children's tales, best left buried in the shadows of the past. To be accused of sorcery is a death sentence. To seek out forbidden knowledge is treason.

Cael Brightwood has never thought of himself as anyone important. He is a scribe, one of hundreds, spending endless days beneath the vaulted ceilings of the city's grand scriptorium. He lives for ink and parchment, for the promise of stories—never for the stories themselves. The elite treat him as invisible, while the regime's enforcers march past, ever watchful for the flicker of resistance. For someone like Cael, obedience is safety, silence is survival.

Yet beneath the monotony of his dutiful life, a thousand unanswered questions burn. He is drawn to the rumors that linger at the edges of conversation: vanished texts, secret societies, strange happenings curiously omitted from the annals. The greatest myth of all is that of the Ember Codex, a legendary tome said to have sparked an age of wonders—and chaos—before being lost forever during the Purges. Most believe it destroyed, yet a few whisper that it still endures, somewhere deep below the city's ancient stones.

On a night that should have been no different than any other, Cael's world fractures. An errant scroll, a hidden door, and the weight of history crashing down bring him face to face with the forbidden Codex. In that moment, a latent flicker awakens inside him, and for the first time, he feels the shimmer of true power: dangerous, impossible, and utterly exhilarating. Within the amber-lit gloom of the archive, Cael finds himself at a crossroads—one that threatens not only his life, but the fragile peace of Aldraen itself.

But Cael is not alone in his discovery. As word spreads, eyes—both mortal and something more—begin to watch. The regime's Blackcloaks tighten their grip. Murmurs of resistance gather in the shadows. Ancient magic stirs, its echoes rippling across sleeping valleys and broken towers. The return of the Codex may herald hope for the powerless, or unleash a storm to sweep them all away.

This is Cael's world: a realm where the light of rebellion is kindled by forgotten lore, and even the smallest ember has the potential to ignite an inferno. As Aldraen stands on the brink, the question is no longer whether magic will return, but what price will be

paid when it does.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Forbidden Archive

The air in the Grand Scriptorium always tasted of old paper and dust motes dancing in sunbeams. For Cael Brightwood, it was the smell of home, even if his home was a cramped corner desk beneath a perpetually leaky skylight. Today, however, the scent was laced with something else: the faint, metallic tang of fear. It clung to the humid air like a shroud, a byproduct of the latest Decree issued by the Voryn regime. Another public burning of 'heretical texts' had taken place in the Plaza of Chains that morning, the smoke still visible on the horizon.

Cael meticulously copied a trade manifest, his quill scratching a rhythmic counterpoint to the distant clang of the city's bells. His fingers, stained perpetually with ink, moved with practiced ease. On the surface, he was just another diligent scribe in a long line of them, unremarkable and easily overlooked. This was, by design, his greatest protection. The less attention he drew, the safer he remained.

But beneath the placid exterior, his mind was a kaleidoscope of whispered histories and half-forgotten lore. While others copied legal codes and tax records, Cael sought out the obscure, the texts with strange marginalia, the ledgers that seemed to omit entire decades. He was a collector of curiosities, a silent scavenger in the vast intellectual graveyard of Aldraen. He knew, deep in his gut, that the Voryn version of history was a carefully constructed lie.

His current assignment was a particularly mind-numbing inventory of the scriptorium's oldest, least-accessed wing—the Restricted Archives. Few scribes were ever granted access, and those who were typically emerged looking grayer than usual. Rumors abounded about what lay within: ancient treaties, forgotten genealogies, and, more darkly, the confiscated libraries of those accused of magic during the Purges.

It was this last possibility that quickened Cael's pulse. The Voryn Purges, centuries ago, had systematically eradicated all vestiges of magic, burning not just practitioners, but their knowledge. Libraries had been razed, scholars executed, and entire lineages wiped from the records. Yet, how could one truly destroy an idea? Or a book?

He finished the current line, dipped his quill, and consulted the dusty shelf map. The Restricted Archives were a labyrinth, a maze of forgotten knowledge and crumbling parchment. His lamp, a small, oil-burning lantern, cast dancing shadows as he ventured deeper, the air growing colder and heavier with each step. The silence was profound, broken only by the scuttling of unseen creatures and the distant drip of water.

He passed towering shelves of diplomatic correspondence, scrolls bound with crumbling seals, and leather-bound tomes whose titles were too faded to read. Most of it was exactly what the regime claimed: mundane, dusty history. But Cael's instincts, honed by years of sifting through the dross, prickled. He felt it—the faint, undeniable thrum of something *else*.

The inventory called for him to cross-reference a specific section—Aisle 17, Bay G, as marked by a crudely drawn 'X' on the brittle map. He squinted at the faded labels, the ink practically dissolved into the paper. This section seemed to hold particularly ancient texts, many without legible titles, simply identified by numerical codes. His fingers traced the spines, a fine layer of grime coating his fingertips.

One shelf, however, was different. It was recessed, a shallow indentation in the stone wall, almost as if it had been built to conceal something. The surrounding shelves were overflowing, but this one held only a single, dark object, partially obscured by a hanging tapestry frayed at the edges. No dust motes danced around it. No lingering scent of decay. It seemed... untouched.

Curiosity, a dangerous companion in Aldraen, overruled caution. Cael reached out, pushing aside the brittle threads of the tapestry. His fingers brushed against cold, smooth metal. Not wood. Not leather. Something else entirely. He pulled.

The object slid out with surprising ease, releasing a faint whisper of air, as if a long-held breath had been exhaled. It was a book, but unlike any Cael had ever seen. Its covers were not of leather or wood, but of a dark, obsidian-like material, polished to a dull sheen. Intricate, swirling patterns, like trapped smoke, seemed to shift within its surface. There were no clasps, no visible hinges. It looked as if it had been forged from a single, seamless piece of night.

He turned it over in his hands. It was surprisingly heavy, dense with a peculiar kind of latent energy that seemed to hum beneath his skin. There was no title on the spine, no inscription on the cover. Just the silent, swirling patterns that drew his gaze, trapping it. His thumb brushed against a faint indentation near the edge. A symbol, perhaps? Too worn to discern.

A strange warmth began to bloom in Cael's palm, radiating from the book. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was distinct, unfamiliar. It felt like a low thrumming, a quiet beat against his own pulse. He opened it.

There was no sound, no dramatic flash of light. The pages, if they could even be called pages, were not parchment or vellum. They were thin, almost translucent sheets of the same dark, glassy material as the cover, impossibly smooth. And on them, characters glowed with a faint, internal light, like embers cooling in a hearth. They

were not the Common Tongue, nor any Old Aldraenic dialect Cael knew. They were fluid, arcane symbols, alien and beautiful.

As Cael stared at the glowing script, something stirred within him. It was a sensation he couldn't name, a distant echo of forgotten power. A warmth spread from his hands, up his arms, settling in his chest. It felt like a dormant muscle flexing for the first time, a sense of rightness, of connection, that startled him. He felt... *more*.

He didn't notice the small, leather-bound scroll that slipped from between the glowing pages and landed with a soft *thud* on the dusty stone floor. His attention was wholly captivated by the enigmatic patterns on the book's surface, patterns that now seemed to mirror the strange, unfamiliar energy surging within him. The symbols on the page seemed to shimmer, their internal light brightening ever so slightly.

A sharp snap from the doorway shattered the moment. Cael froze, his heart leaping into his throat. He clutched the book tighter, the strange warmth intensifying in his hands. Had someone followed him? Had the whispers of the Restricted Archives finally reached the ears of the Blackcloaks?

A low growl rumbled through the silence. Not human. Cael slowly turned, his breath catching in his chest. Standing silhouetted against the faint light of the scriptorium beyond was not a Blackcloak, but something else entirely. Something large, furred, and with eyes that glinted with malevolent intelligence. A griffin, a creature thought to be long extinct, stared back at him from the mouth of the archive. Its gaze wasn't curious; it was predatory. And its attention was fixed, not on Cael, but on the book clutched in his hands.

Cael's mind raced, a jumble of ancient legends and immediate terror. What was a griffin doing in the heart of the Grand Scriptorium? And why did it seem to *sense* the book? He felt a sudden, undeniable instinct: *protect this*. The impulse was raw, primal, and utterly baffling. It was as if the book itself had whispered the command into his very soul.

The griffin took a deliberate step forward, its massive claws scraping against the stone. Its wings, tucked tightly against its body, were a blur of dark feathers. A low snarl vibrated through the air, shaking the dust from the shelves. Cael instinctively took a step back, bumping against a precarious stack of scrolls. They tumbled to the floor with a deafening crash, scattering into a chaotic mess.

The griffin flinched, its focus momentarily broken. In that brief window of opportunity, Cael's eyes darted to the scroll that had fallen from the book. It lay at his feet, unrolled just enough to reveal a single, glowing symbol, identical to one he'd seen within the Codex. Without thinking, Cael scooped up the scroll, clutching both the book and the parchment to his chest.

The griffin let out a frustrated shriek, a sound that grated on Cael's teeth. It lunged, not directly at him, but at the empty space where the book had been moments before. Its claws gouged deep furrows into the stone shelf. This creature wasn't after him, not truly. It was after the Codex.

Cael didn't wait to find out more. Panic, cold and sharp, spurred him into motion. He scrambled backwards, deeper into the maze of shelves, the heavy book strangely light in his trembling hands. The griffin, hampered by its size in the narrow aisles, roared its fury, but Cael was smaller, faster. He knew this labyrinth better than any creature of the wild. He knew its hidden passages, its forgotten alcoves. He had to escape. And somehow, he had to keep this impossible, dangerous book safe. What had he unearthed? And who else knew of its existence? The questions spun in his head, but for now, only one thought mattered: *run*.

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