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The Crimson Moon

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Introduction

Harper Cross had always felt out of place in the city of Calenton, where the ceaseless hum of traffic and neon billboards masked stories far older than the skyline. By day, she tended to brittle archives at the city's otherwise unremarkable historical society, restoring the forgotten oddities that history had left behind. Yet it was at dusk, in those silvery moments lost between sunlight and streetlamps, that Harper sensed she truly belonged to another world—one fringed by the echoes of spirits only she could see.

For as long as she could remember, Harper's peculiar sight felt more like a curse than a gift. Ghostly apparitions flickered between the subway cars, whispers curled along alleyways where tragedy had etched its mark, and spectral memories clung to forgotten corners. She told herself these visions were dreams fractured by sleeplessness or the city's relentless pace. But each encounter tugged at a thread unraveling her understanding of reality, hinting at a deeper truth hidden beneath Calenton's bustling façade.

Calenton itself was a city of contradictions: centuries-old cathedrals glittered beside metallic skyscrapers, vibrant street festivals thrived in the shadow of silent ruins, and an undercurrent of superstition endured in everyday rituals. Harper found solace in these juxtapositions, drawn to the city's enigmatic energy even as it unsettled her. Her closest companions were books of obscure lore, elderly patrons whose tales blurred the line between myth and memory, and the shadowy remnants of a world that seemed to exist solely for her eyes.

Despite her solitude, Harper's life was comfortingly predictable—until the night the crimson moon rose. Unlike the ordinary lunar eclipses she'd learned about as a child, this mooncast painted the city in an uncanny light, igniting a fever dream of surging spirits and unfamiliar energies. Suddenly, the boundary between the seen and unseen began to dissolve. Old wards and protections flickered on ancient stones. On that night, Calenton's myths bared their teeth, and balance—so delicately maintained—fractured.

This is the story of how an ordinary archivist became the lynchpin in an ancient conflict, her quiet world set ablaze by forces older and far more dangerous than she ever imagined. As Harper is swept into an unfolding war between celestial exiles and forgotten gods, she will discover that her gift is not a burden, but a beacon—a light against the gathering dark. The path ahead will test every bond, every belief, and every secret she holds about herself, the city, and the realms that bleed through its trembling streets.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows Beneath Neon

The scent of stale coffee and aging paper was Harper's personal perfume. Monday morning in the Calenton Historical Society archives was typically a quiet affair, a comforting hush punctuated only by the rustle of turning pages and the distant whine of the city'. She preferred it that way. Today, however, a frantic energy crackled in the air, a hum that wasn't from the fluorescent lights overhead but from somewhere deeper, an unseen tremor that set her teeth on edge.

She pushed her spectacles higher on her nose, frowning at a particularly stubborn ink bleed on a 19th-century city map. Her current project involved cataloging the forgotten urban planning proposals from the city's early days, a task as thrilling as watching paint dry, but one she found immensely satisfying. Each faded line, each forgotten street name, held a quiet echo of lives lived and futures imagined. For Harper, these echoes weren't just metaphorical.

A shimmering distortion flickered at the edge of her vision, near a stack of dusty topographical surveys. It was a familiar sight, a translucent ripple in the air that, to her, often coalesced into faint, ethereal figures. Today, though, it seemed more agitated, a swirling vortex of indistinct shapes. They weren't quite ghosts, not in the screaming, chain-rattling sense of popular fiction, but rather imprints, residual energy, fragments of moments eternally playing out on a spiritual loop.

Harper had learned to ignore them, to filter them out like background noise. Most were harmless, fleeting specters of everyday life: a merchant haggling over prices, a child chasing a lost ball, a lover's last embrace. She'd spent years constructing an elaborate mental architecture to compartmentalize these visions, labeling them as vivid imagination, optical illusions, or side effects of too much caffeine. Anything but what they truly seemed to be.

Today, however, the archival spirits were more boisterous than usual. A woman in a voluminous bustle, her face a blur of sorrow, paced a phantom circle where the reading desks now stood. Nearby, a group of shadowy men, their voices like wind chimes, gestured emphatically at a non-existent blueprint. Their movements were faster, more erratic, their forms more defined than Harper had ever seen them. It was unsettling.

"Morning, Harper. Lost in the annals again?" A cheerful voice cut through her concentration. Mrs. Albright, the head archivist, bustled in, her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun, her floral scarf a vibrant splash against the muted tones of the archives. Mrs. Albright was a walking encyclopedia of Calenton's history and Harper's reluctant

mentor, a woman whose boundless enthusiasm sometimes bordered on overwhelming.

"Just trying to decipher this particular cartographer's obsession with hidden alleys," Harper replied, gesturing to the map. She carefully avoided making eye contact with the ghostly procession that now seemed to be swirling around Mrs. Albright's feet. Sometimes, if she focused too hard, the spirits would become so vivid they felt tangible, and maintaining her carefully constructed normalcy became a monumental effort.

Mrs. Albright peered over her shoulder, her eyes twinkling. "Ah, yes, Silas Thorne. A peculiar fellow. Rumor has it he believed the city's true pulse lay in its forgotten thoroughfares, not its grand avenues." She paused, tilting her head. "You look a little... flushed, dear. Everything alright?"

Harper forced a smile. "Just a bit warm in here, I think. Early summer's really hitting us." She hoped her explanation sounded convincing. The last thing she needed was Mrs. Albright suggesting she take a break, which would invariably lead to a lengthy discussion about the benefits of herbal tea and mindful breathing. Harper found mindfulness particularly challenging when an entire spectral opera was unfolding in her peripheral vision.

"Well, don't overdo it," Mrs. Albright advised, moving towards her own desk. "And do be careful with that Thorne map. It's quite delicate. We're expecting a new acquisition this afternoon, a collection of old ceremonial artifacts from the Calenton Benevolent Society. Should be interesting."

Ceremonial artifacts. The words sent a shiver down Harper's spine that had nothing to do with the temperature. Her peculiar sight seemed particularly attuned to objects with a strong spiritual resonance. Old churches, ancient cemeteries, even antique shops - they were always rife with echoes. She had a feeling a collection of ceremonial artifacts would be a veritable concert of spiritual energies, and she wasn't prepared for an encore today.

She tried to redirect her thoughts back to Silas Thorne's perplexing cartography, but the archival spirits seemed to be amplifying. The woman in the bustle was now openly weeping, her translucent tears a shimmering mist that faded before it touched the floor. The men were gesturing wildly, their spectral voices rising in pitch, a chaotic murmur that vibrated just beneath the threshold of audible sound. Harper rubbed her temples. This was worse than usual.

Later that afternoon, the new acquisition arrived. It was a modest collection, mostly brass censers, worn wooden effigies, and several rolls of brittle parchment covered in unfamiliar symbols. The moment the boxes were wheeled into the archives, Harper

felt a surge of cold energy, like a draft from an open tomb. The air grew heavy, thick with a scent of ozone and something akin to damp earth.

The archival spirits, which had quieted to a low thrum after Mrs. Albright retreated for her lunch, now erupted into a cacophony. They whirled around the new artifacts, drawn to them like moths to a flame. The weeping woman wailed, her ghostly form thrashing. The shadowy men pointed with renewed urgency, their whispers coalescing into a desperate plea that Harper almost understood.

Harper felt a sudden, sharp pain behind her eyes, a pressure that intensified with each passing second. She gripped the edge of her desk, her knuckles white. This wasn't just an echo; this was something raw, potent. The parchment, in particular, seemed to pulse with an inner light, a faint, crimson glow that only she could see. Her breath hitched.

She knew she shouldn't. Every instinct, every carefully constructed defense mechanism, screamed at her to turn away, to busy herself with another map, another mundane task. But a primal curiosity, a pull she couldn't resist, drew her towards the boxes. She had to see. She had to understand why these particular objects were stirring the spiritual pot so violently.

She approached the crates, her footsteps light, almost reverent. The crimson glow from the parchment intensified, a silent beacon in the dim archives. As she reached the boxes, one of the wooden effigies, carved with serpentine figures and eyes of polished obsidian, seemed to *vibrate* as she passed. A cold dread seeped into her bones.

Reaching for the top parchment, Harper felt an electric current zap through her fingertips. The moment she touched the brittle paper, the world shifted. The archive around her dissolved, replaced by a swirling vortex of shimmering light and shadow. The familiar scent of old paper vanished, replaced by the heavy perfume of burning incense and damp earth.

She was no longer in the Calenton Historical Society. She stood in a cavern, its walls rough-hewn stone, illuminated by the flickering light of numerous candles. A group of robed figures chanted in a low, resonant language, their faces obscured by deep hoods. In the center of the cavern, on a raised stone altar, lay an open tome, its pages covered in the very symbols she had seen on the parchment. And above it all, suspended in the air, was a shimmering, almost liquid orb of deep crimson.

Harper gasped, but no sound escaped her lips. She was a silent observer, a phantom in a place she should not be. The chanting grew louder, more insistent, building to a fever pitch. The crimson orb pulsed, its light growing brighter, casting grotesque shadows on the cavern walls. She felt a profound sense of awe and terror, a visceral

understanding that she had intruded upon something ancient, something sacred, something profoundly dangerous.

The robed figures raised their hands, their voices now a unified cry, and the crimson orb descended, settling gently into the open pages of the tome. A blinding flash of light erupted, throwing Harper backward, even though she felt no physical impact. The world spun, the cavern dissolving into a kaleidoscope of colors, then darkness.

She gasped again, this time for real, her eyes snapping open. She was back in the archives, sprawled on the dusty floor, the boxes of artifacts still untouched. The scent of stale coffee and aging paper returned, familiar and grounding. The archival spirits were gone, replaced by an eerie silence. The only sound was her own ragged breathing.

Harper pushed herself up, her heart hammering against her ribs. She scrambled away from the boxes, her gaze fixed on the parchment. The crimson glow was gone. The symbols seemed inert, just ink on old paper. Had she imagined it? Had the day's strange energies finally overwhelmed her?

But the cold dread lingered, a tangible weight in her chest. And as she looked around the quiet archive, a new detail snagged her attention. Where the weeping woman had paced, where the shadowy men had argued, there was nothing. The echoes, the imprints, the very fabric of the spirit realm she usually perceived—it was all gone. Wiped clean.

A terrible, dawning realization settled upon her. The parchment, the ceremony, the crimson orb... she hadn't just *seen* an echo. She had *intruded*. And in doing so, she had torn something open, a veil between worlds that had been thin enough for her to perceive, but perhaps not thin enough for her to walk through. Her peculiar talent, for the first time, felt less like a passive observation and more like an active, destructive force. And the silence in the archive, the absence of even the most innocuous spirit, was more terrifying than any phantom wail. Something had changed. And it had changed because of her.

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