

ASHEN ROADS' GHOSTS

Black

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The dim light of dawn seeped through the grates of the crypt, casting an eerie glow over the stone pedestals that held the remnants of forgotten lives. I crouched beside one such pedestal, my fingers brushing against the frost-weathered name etched into the marble – Arin Vexar, son of Everia's merchant guild. The memories attached to these names were as shrouded in mystery as the purpose behind their burial here.

My gaze drifted towards the center of the crypt, where a faint, almost imperceptible hum emanated from the nightmarish fresco above the altar. I'd long since lost count of how many nights I'd spent listening to whispers carried on the drafts that seeped through the stone, a litany of pleas and curses whispered in the dark. The hum itself felt like an old scar, festering with an otherworldly pain.

"Brother Arcturus?" A soft voice cut across my reverie, barely carrying from the entrance of the crypt.

I straightened, wiping my damp palms on the hem of my tunic as the figure emerged into the half-light. Eluned, a Curator with an uncanny talent for ferreting out Unseen Ties – remnants of lives connected by more than coincidence or chance – nodded toward the pedestal I'd been examining.

"Recognize him?" she asked, her eyes already moving on to another of the pedestals.

I followed her gaze and hesitated. This one bore an unfamiliar name: Morwen Nightwalker, with no discernible connection to any of the city's noble houses or merchant guilds.

A sudden draft stirred the air, sending a faint shiver down my spine as the whispering in the fresco picked up tempo, almost imperceptibly taking on a new cadence. I glanced at Eluned, who'd stopped beside me, her eyes fixed intently on the name.

"Find anything?" she asked again, this time with an air of urgency.

In the brief pause before my response, a memory flashed across my mind's eye: Ashen Roads, that haunted thoroughfare where city and Undercroft met. It was said to be the location where Unseen Ties most often appeared – places where lives collided under pressure or circumstance. Morwen Nightwalker...

"Ashen Roads," I muttered.

Eluned nodded curtly, beckoning me toward the exit as if already aware of what lay ahead.

In the early light of morning, Ashen Road's vendors and traders were beginning to stir. We blended into their ranks as we walked southward. The city was its own living entity, woven from a vast tapestry of interconnected lives. It was here that Unseen Ties revealed themselves most clearly – in chance encounters or whispered rumors.

We navigated past the sprawling Nightforge foundry, where the air reeked of burning metal and sweat. Its owner, Marcellin Blackwood, stood at the threshold, watching us pass with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Rumors had it his family was tied to certain... influences that lurked in the city's shadows.

As we approached the midpoint between the Nightforge and the imposing bulk of the Thalos Keep, Eluned halted. We'd reached a point where an assortment of taverns and market stalls served as both threshold and sanctuary for those navigating the invisible world within Ashen Road's labyrinthine alleys.

"What's your purpose here?" Eluned asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The flickering torches that lit the street cast long shadows, making it seem like the Unseen Ties surrounding us – an unseen throng of forgotten names and lost lives – stirred restlessly. I hesitated before answering, as much to myself as to Eluned: "Perhaps, this time, we're not searching for them; perhaps they'll find us."

In that instant, a faint chill settled on my skin, as if a draft from the Undercroft itself had slipped into our world.

We'd entered Ashen Road in pursuit of more questions than answers. As night deepened, the city's shadows would writhe like living things, whispering secrets to those willing to listen. It was then that we might uncover not just Morwen Nightwalker's purpose but the very strings tying us all together within this tapestry of lives.

The vendors and traders parted around us, their gazes flicking between Eluned and me with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity. Ashen Road was a place where people came to shed their identities, if only for a moment – to lose themselves in the anonymity of the crowd or to seek solace among the Unseen Ties that connected them to others like themselves.

We navigated through the crowds, our footsteps weaving between makeshift stalls selling everything from second-hand goods to exotic curios. The scent of roasting meats and fresh bread wafted through the air, drawing my stomach into a grumble. Eluned shot me a sideways glance but said nothing, her eyes scanning the throng for

any sign of our quarry.

As we walked, I found myself becoming increasingly attuned to the whispers in the fresco's hum – an otherworldly cadence that seemed to grow more distinct with each step. The Unseen Ties here felt like a maelstrom, swirling around me and Eluned with an almost palpable intensity. I spotted at least half a dozen individuals who appeared to be lost or searching for someone – their faces a map of desperation.

We paused in front of a small, cramped stall tucked between a haberdasher's and a pawnshop. The vendor, a grizzled old woman named Mirabel, eyed us warily from beneath the brim of her cap. "What do you want?" she growled, hand resting on the worn hilt of her dagger.

Eluned produced a small pouch of silver coins, which I knew was more than just a bribe – it was our way of offering a silent acknowledgment of the Unseen Ties that bound Mirabel to other lives, other losses. Her gaze flickered between us before she nodded curtly and said, "I might know something about Morwen Nightwalker."

A small, anxious crowd formed around our stall, sensing an opportunity to pry into secrets they couldn't quite grasp. Eluned held up a hand, warning them off as Mirabel continued in hushed tones, "She was here a fortnight ago, trading stories with the one-armed man... you know the one I mean – runs a little corner shop near the Red Vesper Inn."

I exchanged a look with Eluned, our eyes locked on a single thought: the one-armed man was rumored to be a skilled mediator between worlds, someone who might know more about Unseen Ties than anyone. And where he traded secrets, whispers spread like wildfire through Ashen Road's hidden channels.

As we pushed our way past Mirabel's stall and into the throng, I felt the hum in the fresco begin to grow louder – a maddening echo that threatened to drown out my own thoughts. It was then I saw it: a flicker of recognition on Eluned's face as she stumbled toward me, her hand grasping for my arm. "Brother Arcturus," she whispered urgently, "we're being watched."

We veered into a narrow alleyway, the press of bodies behind us momentarily held at bay by the intervening stalls. Eluned's grip on my arm tightened as she dragged me toward the Red Vesper Inn, its facade looming above the surrounding rooftops like a crimson-painted specter.

Inside, the tavern was alive with the murmur of hushed conversations and the clinking of glasses. We wove through the crowds, our faces illuminated by the warm glow of lanterns and the fire crackling in the hearth. I spotted the one-armed man behind the bar, his prosthetic limb a testament to some long-forgotten battle or accident. His eyes locked onto us, and he nodded almost imperceptibly as we approached.

"What can I get you?" he asked, wiping down the counter with a dirty rag. Eluned produced another pouch of coins, this one larger than the last, and slid it across the bar. "We're looking for information on Morwen Nightwalker," she said, her voice low and even. The one-armed man's gaze flickered between us before he nodded once more, his expression a mask.

"Follow me," he said, sliding off the stool to lead us through a narrow door hidden behind a tapestry. We found ourselves in a cramped, smoke-filled room that reeked of old books and something sweeter – like honeysuckle on a summer breeze. Shelves lined the walls, stacked haphazardly with texts bound in worn leather and adorned with strange symbols. The one-armed man gestured for us to sit, his eyes roving the room as if searching for eavesdroppers.

I took a seat at a small, ornate desk, running my fingers over the intricate carvings that seemed to tell their own story. Eluned sat beside me, her eyes scanning the shelves with an air of unease. "What do you know about Morwen Nightwalker?" she asked the one-armed man, who leaned against the wall opposite us, his arms crossed.

He took a long drag on a clay pipe, exhaling slowly as he began to speak. "Morwen was... involved in some dealings I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy." His voice dropped lower still, the words hanging in the air like mist. "She traded in whispers – secrets she'd uncovered in the city's underbelly for a price that left her marked."

The room seemed to darken around us, as if the very shadows themselves were listening to our conversation. I leaned forward, my heart pounding against my ribcage. "What kind of secrets?" Eluned asked, her voice low and urgent.

The one-armed man's gaze flickered between us before he stood, his movements economical. "Follow me," he said again, leading us through a hidden door that opened into the city's narrow streets once more.

We trailed behind him, our footsteps echoing off the buildings as he navigated through a maze of alleys and side streets that seemed to defy the city's map. I'd heard rumors about this part of Ashen Road – how the very fabric of reality was woven with threads of forgotten history, hidden lives, and whispered secrets. The one-armed man led us deeper into this labyrinth, and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being pulled toward a destination he alone knew.

The air thickened with an almost palpable anticipation as we turned a corner onto a narrow street lined with ancient buildings that seemed to lean in on each other like conspirators. Their walls exhaled dust and forgotten memories, the scents of which clung to us like a shroud. Eluned's grip on my arm had relaxed, but her eyes remained fixed on the one-armed man as he quickened his pace, disappearing around a bend ahead.

I followed close behind, my gaze scanning the rooftops for any sign of pursuit or surveillance. The city's secrets were known to be written in stone, but I'd yet to decipher the language. Every roofline and alleyway held potential hiding spots, and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being herded toward some unseen eventuality. A gust of wind swept through the narrow street, whipping dust devils into life and momentarily blinding me with its ferocity.

The one-armed man halted before a door marked only by a small iron knocker in the shape of a crescent moon. It hung on an unassuming building that seemed to be nothing more than a vacant warehouse - at least, from a glance. He turned back to us with an almost imperceptible nod and said, "This is where Morwen Nightwalker left her mark."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite the trepidation growing within me. A faint shiver danced along my spine as Eluned stepped forward, her hand reaching for the door handle before hesitating. The one-armed man's words hung in the air like a whispered promise: "Be warned, what lies ahead is not for the faint of heart."

The door creaked open, releasing a musty smell of age and decay into the evening air. Eluned's hand closed around my arm again, this time with a firmer grip as she stepped inside. The one-armed man led us down a narrow corridor lined with cobweb-shrouded tapestries that seemed to depict forgotten rituals. Shadows clung to the walls like damp, gray veils.

We descended into the depths of the building, the air thickening with the scent of incense and old parchment. I stumbled over the hem of my cloak as we followed the one-armed man down a final set of stairs, our footsteps echoing through the silence. At the bottom, a faint light flickered in the distance - a candle or a lantern, casting eerie shadows on the walls. The room seemed to unfurl before us like a dark, twisted flower.

As I stepped into the space, my eyes widened at the sight before me. Morwen Nightwalker lay on a narrow pallet, her face deathly pale and her body shrouded in a tattered cloak. She was bound to the bed with thin chains that seemed almost decorative compared to the heavy locks that secured her wrists and ankles. A silver pendant glinted around her neck, the symbol of the Red Hand - a sign reserved for those who'd walked the thin line between worlds.

The one-armed man gestured for us to remain silent, his eyes scanning the room as if searching for hidden observers. Eluned's gaze locked onto Morwen, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of recognition there - something akin to shared grief or old wounds. The one-armed man approached the pallet, his movements slow and deliberate, as he inspected the chains that bound Morwen. His gaze lingered on the pendant around her neck before he turned back to us.

"Morwen Nightwalker has been here for three nights," he said quietly, his eyes never leaving ours. "She's not the only one, however. There are others like her - those who've walked the line and left their mark." His words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning as Eluned took a step closer to Morwen's pallet, her face a mask of calm. The flickering light cast shadows on the walls, making it seem as though the chains binding Morwen were writhing like living serpents.

As I watched Eluned approach the pallet, I noticed something else - a small, leather-bound book lying open on a nearby stool. Its pages turned with an almost imperceptible breeze, revealing lines of script that seemed to shimmer in the dim light. The words themselves were too small for me to read, but the symbol at the top of the page made my heart stumble: the mark of the Unseen Ties - the same mark that adorned the fresco above Eluned's stall.

The one-armed man followed my gaze and nodded almost imperceptibly before turning back to Morwen. "You'd best be careful what you stir up here," he said, his voice a low warning. "Some secrets are better left buried."

As I stepped closer to the stool, the pages of the leather-bound book rustled softly in the air. The mark of the Unseen Ties seemed to pulse with a faint, otherworldly energy, drawing my attention back to Eluned, who stood transfixed beside Morwen's pallet. Her eyes were closed, her face a map of deep lines and creases that spoke of unshed tears. I felt a shiver run down my spine as she reached out a trembling hand to brush a strand of hair from Morwen's pale face.

The one-armed man cleared his throat softly, breaking the spell that had fallen over us. "We should leave now," he said, his voice low and urgent. "This place isn't safe." But Eluned didn't move, her gaze still locked onto Morwen as if searching for something lost long ago. I placed a gentle hand on her arm, trying to guide her back, but she shook me off, her eyes snapping open with a fierce intensity.

"What's this?" she whispered, pointing a shaking finger at the book lying open on the stool. The pages seemed to be still turning, as if blown by an invisible breeze. I leaned in closer, squinting at the tiny script that danced across the page. The words were unfamiliar, but the mark at the top - the symbol of the Unseen Ties - seemed to be connected to a web of other symbols and markings that stretched across the page like a map of hidden pathways.

The one-armed man's eyes narrowed as he watched Eluned, his expression unreadable. "Leave it," he said finally, his voice firm but low. "We shouldn't meddle in things we don't understand." But Eluned didn't move, her fingers reaching out to touch the book as if drawn by an unseen force. The pages continued to turn, the script dancing across the page with an otherworldly speed.

I felt a presence behind me and turned to see a figure emerging from the shadows, its eyes fixed intently on Eluned. It was a woman, her face deathly pale, with skin as white as alabaster. A silver pendant glinted around her neck, similar to the one that bound Morwen, but this one bore the mark of the Red Hand in crimson lettering. The woman's gaze never wavered from Eluned as she moved closer, her movements fluid and almost predatory.

The air seemed to thicken around us, heavy with unspoken meaning. I took a step back, my hand on the dagger at my belt, but Eluned didn't seem to notice the danger that loomed before her. Her eyes were fixed on the woman, a look of dawning recognition etched across her face. "Aethera," she whispered, the name barely audible over the beating of our hearts.

The one-armed man's eyes locked onto mine, a warning flickering in their depths as Aethera stepped closer, her movements gliding across the floor like a ghost. Eluned's grip on the book tightened, and I felt a shiver run down my spine as the pages seemed to begin turning more rapidly now, the script blurring into a maddening dance of light and shadow.

As Aethera's gaze locked onto Eluned, the air in the room seemed to vibrate with unspoken tension. The one-armed man stepped forward, his movements cautious, as if trying not to break the fragile thread of understanding between the two women. "Aethera," he said softly, his voice a warning, but Aethera's eyes never wavered from Eluned.

Eluned's face was deathly pale, her fingers tightening around the book as she took a step back, her eyes fixed on Aethera with a mix of fear and something else – a deep longing that seemed to burn like a candle in the dark. "What are you doing here?" she whispered, her voice barely audible over the creaking of the old wooden floorboards.

Aethera's gaze flickered to Eluned's hand, and for an instant, I thought I saw a flash of anger or warning, but it was quickly replaced by a mask of calm. "I've come to take you home," she said, her voice low and even, but with a hint of something beneath – a threat, perhaps, or a promise.

The one-armed man's eyes narrowed as he watched Aethera, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "You're not taking anyone anywhere without my permission," he growled, but Aethera's gaze never wavered from Eluned. "We don't have time for this," she said, her words cutting through the air like a knife. "The Unseen Ties are stirring, and you know what that means."

I felt a shiver run down my spine as Aethera's words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. What did they mean? What was happening to Morwen? And what exactly were these Unseen Ties, and why were they stirring now? The questions swirled in my head like a maelstrom, but Eluned seemed to know something, her eyes

locked onto Aethera's as if searching for answers.

The air in the room grew thick with tension as Aethera took another step closer, her hand extended towards Eluned. "Come," she said, her voice low and urgent, but Eluned hesitated, her grip on the book tightening. For a moment, I thought she might resist, but then she turned and walked away from me, towards Aethera.

The one-armed man's eyes flickered to mine, his face set in a grim expression. "Don't follow," he whispered, but I was already moving after Eluned, my feet carrying me across the room without thought or reason. We stepped out of the small chamber and into a narrow corridor, the door creaking shut behind us as we emerged into a dimly lit hallway that seemed to stretch on forever.

As we walked, Aethera's words hung in the air, their meaning seeping into my mind like a slow-moving poison. The Unseen Ties were stirring - what did that mean? And why was Eluned walking with Aethera, her hand grasping the book as if it were a lifeline? I stumbled after them, my heart pounding in my chest, but Eluned didn't look back, her eyes fixed on some point ahead, some destination or fate that only she could see.

Tags: Ashen Roads, Unseen Ties, Haunted Reminiscence