

# ASHEN ROADS' PATH TO REDEMPTION

Black

## Ashen Roads

A worn pair of boots led me out of the morning mist, past the flickering torches that seemed to hold back the darkness. The Ashen Roads had seen better days; roads that once crisscrossed the land like the veins of a living thing now stood as testament to neglect and wear. Grime etched the stones like the lines on a veteran's face.

In the distance, the silhouette of a lone figure emerged from the haze. A traveler, perhaps. People avoided the Ashen Roads unless duty called; rumors spoke of whispers that lashed out like flails when walked upon uninvited. I kept my hand resting on the grip of my sword, not because I feared for my life but for theirs.

The figure quickened its pace as it sensed me watching. Skin-tanned and eyes-hooded, their features revealed themselves only as they drew near. This one's hands were empty; no pack or saddlebag weighed down their shoulders. Just the weight of boots, worn like mine, but a shade too light. I narrowed my eyes; few traveled this road without reason.

"A name?" the figure asked, breaking stride for the first time in the conversation's opening moments. "To guide me?"

"My name is not for free." A wind stung the air with whispers of dust, sending the torches dancing. In an instant, a small stone flickered to life at my feet. Brief candlelight revealed the figure—hair shaved save for braids on the temples, marking a Curator. The eyes above that mark held no warmth.

"I've heard," they said once the flame faded, "that you walk where armies cannot." A quiet reverence, though not an unfamiliar name. Kael Varn's specialty wasn't for the faint of heart or those in need of grand spectacle; his were whispers and silent corrections. "If so, then perhaps I've sought out a guide, one who understands that balance."

"I am what is spoken," I corrected softly.

The Curator's expression shifted from scrutiny to recognition. "You have walked this road before. Seen its weight." They nodded towards the mist-shrouded horizon. "A path, for all its length and twists, may lead you back to yourself, or further into darkness."

"Further," I replied with a single glance at the Ashen Roads ahead.

Their nod confirmed what I'd said; this road led down winding paths to places where memories were forged, tested, or lost. The weight of consequence hung heavy in my chest; how much more would I bear? We set our footsteps into tandem rhythm and pressed on, leaving behind the flickering torches that had cast shadows of doubt.

Sun rose on our walk: a pale hand stretching over the world's worn skin. It painted an uneven glow upon the Ashen Roads' cracked stones. The heat woke scents I hadn't noticed during the night: decay and damp earth.

"Once," the Curator broke the silence, "you spoke of redemption measured by action, not intention. Can you tell me what price that costs?"

The question hung heavy like a forgotten burden. For a moment, the Ashen Roads' crumbling stones were the only witness to my thoughts. "Not every balance demands blood," I murmured back. The memory of the last such instance was one I kept locked away.

"Sometimes it's just time." My footsteps hesitated for an instant before resuming their beat with the Curator's.

They nodded silently, then spoke after a few more steps: "I think I see why you're walking this road."

A silence that wasn't uncomfortable, yet felt like one, settled between us.

At dusk, when shadows turned dark, the landscape unfolded a familiar scene. The ruins of Thalos stood before us: ancient stone walls overgrown with ivy and vines, their once-proud towers now cracked spires stretching towards the sky like bony fingers.

"This is it," I said, knowing why we'd come here.

The Curator glanced from me to Thalos's silence. "A place of memories forged, tested, lost."

I offered no response. The wind stung air once more with whispers; in the quiet that followed, a stone flickered at our feet—a small candle burning down to its last ember.

"Perhaps," I said softly after watching it fade, "it's time for me to keep my vow."

We walked in silence through Thalos's overgrown entrance, its ancient stones worn smooth by time and weather. In the fading light, our footsteps echoed off the walls, stirring the ivy and vines into a gentle rustle. The Curator's presence was a reminder that I wasn't alone in carrying this burden; their words had woken something within me, but for how long? The air thickened with an almost palpable weight as we approached the heart of Thalos.

Ahead, a lone statue stood guard: a knight in weathered armor, its eyes turned toward some horizon yet to come. Carved into the base was my own name – Kaelin Valtor – and beneath it, the words "keeper of memories." The wind carried a whispered sigh past the statue's stone lips; I recalled the day it was commissioned, the promise I'd made to stand watch over Thalos's history.

"I've seen them come," the Curator said softly behind me. "The ones who walk Thalos's paths, hoping to rediscover themselves or lay old ghosts to rest." They paused at my side, eyes cast down upon the inscription. "I see now why they're always drawn back here. This is where memories choose their own path, not yours."

A cold breeze picked up as night began to claim Thalos. The Curator's gaze rose to meet mine, but I couldn't quite bring myself to look away from the statue. Memories were one thing; living with them another. My fingers flexed around the hilt of my sword, a reflex born of habit rather than need.

"Perhaps," the Curator continued, "the ones who leave Thalos behind are those who have learned to carry their burdens elsewhere." They fell silent, eyes still fixed on mine as if searching for an answer that only I could provide. In that pause, shadows danced across the walls like dark specters claiming what was rightfully theirs.

We walked further into Thalos's heart – a place where darkness was alive and felt the weight of every memory. Each step carried me closer to the edge of something – redemption, guilt, or both. I couldn't quite tell which would take hold once we reached the end of this path.

The air inside Thalos's heart was heavy with memories, each one a weight on my shoulders I couldn't shake. We walked further, our footsteps echoing off the walls as we delved deeper into the darkness. Shadows danced around us, dark specters claiming their own places in the ruins. The Curator's hand reached out and brushed against mine; their touch was light, but it steadied me, reminding me I wasn't alone.

As we moved through the heart of Thalos, memories began to surface – whispers of battles won and lost, of triumphs and failures that had shaped me into what I'd become. Each step stirred a memory anew: A figure fleeing from an unseen enemy; the cold sweat on my back as I fought alongside comrades in a forgotten skirmish; the face of a loved one etched in my mind's eye when death claimed them. These echoes swirled around us, testing my resolve to keep moving forward.

"I remember when this was a road to something greater," the Curator said softly, their words barely audible over the cacophony of memories. "A path that would lead you out of darkness and into light." They paused, eyes scanning the walls as if searching for something – or someone. "I've seen the weight it leaves behind. The cost."

The statement hung in the air, but I couldn't bring myself to look back. Ahead of us, a great stone door blocked our path, its surface etched with symbols that shone with a faint, ethereal glow. In the darkness, they seemed like stars in a midnight sky. I reached out, hesitated for a moment, then placed my hand upon the door. The symbols pulsed brighter as my fingers made contact.

"This is it," I said finally, voice barely above a whisper. "The heart of Thalos."

The symbols on the door pulsed brighter, bathing us in a soft, ethereal light that danced with the shadows. I felt a shiver run down my spine as the air thickened with anticipation, heavy with secrets and untold tales. The Curator's eyes never left mine, their gaze searching for something within me that only they could see. My hand on the door seemed to anchor us both, a steady heartbeat in the midst of chaos.

The symbols began to etch themselves into my palm, a gentle burning that seared with a memory I'd long suppressed. It was a moment from my past, one I'd thought lost forever – standing amidst the battle-scarred streets of Brindlemark, fighting for what little we had left against the darkness that sought to consume us all. The pain of those days still lingered within me, a fire smoldering in the depths of my soul.

"I remember it all," I said, voice barely above a whisper, as if afraid of shattering the fragile peace. The Curator's hand tightened around mine, a gentle pressure that held me steady against the tide of memories. The door creaked, ever so slightly, as if urging us onward.

The symbols on the door continued to pulse with an otherworldly energy, drawing forth more memories from my mind. I saw a figure standing beside me – not just any figure, but one who had been lost in those early days of battle: my friend and companion, Jax. The memory of his laughter and warmth was like a beacon, calling out to the shadows that clung to me. The burning on my palm intensified as I recalled the promise we made to each other – to walk the Ashen Roads together until one of us found redemption.

The Curator's grip on mine tightened further, their eyes filled with a deep understanding. "You've carried this weight for so long," they said softly. "Perhaps it's time to let go." The words hung in the air like an unspoken prayer as I hesitated at the threshold, poised between two worlds: the world I knew and the one I'd left behind.

The symbols on the door flared brighter still, bathing us in their light. In this moment, I was no longer standing in Thalos's heart; I was back amidst those battle-scarred streets, fighting for what little we had. The memories swirled around me like a maelstrom, threatening to drag me under. But the Curator's hand held fast, their presence a lifeline that kept me anchored.

With a deep breath, I pushed forward, through the doorway and into the heart of Thalos's memories. The light enveloped us both, a radiant glow that seemed to sear away the shadows. For an instant, I was free from the weight of my burdens; in this place, time itself seemed to bend and warp, freeing me from the consequences of my actions.

As we stepped forward, the door creaked shut behind us, sealing off the world outside. The symbols on my palm still pulsed with their gentle, burning light. In this moment, I felt the weight of Thalos's memories shifting within me, the pieces falling into place like a jigsaw puzzle finally completed.

The light from the door's symbols continued to dance across my skin, illuminating memories I'd thought long buried. Jax stood beside me once more, his eyes shining with a fierce determination as we fought side by side in Brindlemark. The sound of clashing steel and screams filled the air, but in this moment, it was almost peaceful. Almost.

Memories spilled out from the symbols etched into my palm like grains of sand running through an hourglass, each one a reminder of what I'd lost and fought for. My mind reeled as I relived moments long past – the taste of blood on my lips during our last stand against the darkness; the warmth of sunlight on Jax's face as we stood victorious over the fallen foe; his final words to me as he fell, urging me forward.

The Curator's grip remained firm around mine, their presence a steady heartbeat in the chaos of my memories. I felt them step closer, their breath whispering against my ear as they spoke a single word: "Remember." In that moment, the past and present collided – Brindlemark's battle-scarred streets merged with Thalos's dark heart, and I was no longer just a traveler lost in his own recollections.

With each step forward, the world around us transformed. The air thickened, heavy with the weight of memories, but also with a sense of longing. Shadows coalesced into figures – loved ones, friends, companions – their faces etched in pain and loss. They moved towards me, drawn by the light emanating from my palm, their eyes pleading for release.

I felt the Curator's hand tighten further around mine as we walked among these echoes, each one a piece of my past. The weight of Thalos's memories seemed to press down upon me now, not just as a burden but as a responsibility – to those I'd lost and the debt I owed them. With every step, the light from my palm grew brighter, illuminating not only the shadows but also the paths that led out of this darkness.

"We have to keep moving," the Curator whispered, their voice barely audible over the cacophony of memories. "The darkness closes in when we linger." I nodded, though it was a struggle to tear myself away from these echoes. Jax's face lingered in my mind, his eyes still pleading with me to carry on.

With one final glance at the figures fading into shadows, I turned back to the Curator and urged them onward. The symbols on my palm pulsed faster now, guiding us deeper into Thalos's heart. We walked through narrow corridors, the air thickening as we delved further into the depths of this place.

The path began to slope downward, leading us deeper beneath Thalos's foundations. I felt a shiver run down my spine as we descended into darkness, the light from my palm casting eerie shadows on the walls. The air grew colder, heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay. In this place, memories twisted and merged, making it difficult to discern what was real and what was not.

Suddenly, we entered a vast chamber, its ceiling lost in darkness. The room seemed to stretch endlessly, with alcoves carved into the walls that held candles – their flames burning bright and steady, casting flickering shadows across the space. I felt the Curator's hand release mine as they stepped forward, their eyes scanning the expanse of the chamber.

"Where are we?" the Curator whispered, their voice barely audible over the creaking of old stone.

I shook my head, but before I could speak, a figure emerged from the shadows.

The figure stepped forward, its features illuminated by the soft glow of the candles. It was a woman with skin like worn leather and hair as dark as the night sky. Her eyes were sunken, her face gaunt, but there was something in them that stirred recognition within me. She moved towards us with an unhurried pace, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls.

As she drew closer, I saw the faintest glimmer of a symbol on her left cheekbone – a mark I'd never seen before, yet it seemed to hold a significance I couldn't quite grasp. Her eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, we simply regarded each other, the only sound the creaking of old stone beneath our feet.

"You're him," she said finally, her voice low and rough as the stones that surrounded us. "I knew you'd come." The Curator's grip on my arm tightened slightly, but I shook them off, taking a step forward towards this mysterious woman.

"Who are you?" I asked, my mind racing with possibilities. She raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes as she regarded me. "I'm someone who's been waiting," she said, the words dripping with a quiet conviction that sent shivers down my spine.

The Curator stepped forward, their face etched with concern. "Waiting for what?" they asked, their voice firm but measured. The woman's gaze flickered to them before settling back on me. "For you to remember," she said, her words hanging in the air like a challenge. I felt the symbols on my palm begin to pulse faster, as if in response

to this claim.

A low hum began to build in the air, a vibration that seemed to emanate from the woman herself. The candles flickered brighter, casting shadows across the walls as she took another step closer. "I can show you," she said, her voice rising above the growing din. "The paths that were hidden, the secrets kept. You've carried this weight for so long; it's time to let go."

The hum reached a crescendo, and the air around us seemed to distort, as if reality itself was bending to accommodate the weight of our conversation. I felt my palm burning hotter, the symbols searing into my skin like a branding iron. The Curator's hand closed around mine once more, their grip tight with a mix of concern and warning.

"We can't afford to linger," they whispered urgently. But I didn't respond, my attention fixed on this mysterious woman. She was offering me something - a chance to uncover the secrets that had haunted me for so long. And I felt an overwhelming urge to take it, no matter the cost.

As I stood transfixed, the woman's eyes locked onto mine with an unnerving intensity. The hum in the air continued to build, a living thing that pulsed with an otherworldly energy. I felt my palm burning hotter still, the symbols etched into my skin throbbing as if they were alive. The Curator's grip on my arm tightened, but I was frozen in place, unable to tear my gaze away from this enigmatic woman.

"Tell me," I managed to croak, my voice barely audible over the growing din. The woman smiled, a faint, wistful smile that sent shivers down my spine. "Ah, you remember," she said, her voice rising above the hum. "The roads of Thalos, the pathways that crisscross its heart." She took another step closer, and I felt the air around us thicken, as if reality itself was warping to accommodate our conversation.

"The secrets I can show you are not for the faint of heart," she warned, her eyes glinting in the candlelight. "Are you prepared to see what lies within?" I hesitated, the symbols on my palm screaming a warning, but something drove me forward - a desperation to uncover the truth that had haunted me for so long. The Curator's grip on my arm was like ice, their voice a soft whisper of warning in my ear. "We can't afford this," they said, but I shook them off, my eyes locked onto the woman.

She raised her hands, palms upwards, as if beckoning me closer still. The air seemed to vibrate with anticipation, and I felt myself drawn towards her, helpless to resist. The hum in the air reached a crescendo, and suddenly, visions burst forth from my mind like fireworks exploding in a midnight sky. Colors danced before my eyes - vivid scenes of battles fought and won, of victories celebrated and losses mourned.

I stumbled forward, caught up in a whirlwind of memories, each one a piece of the puzzle that was my past. The Curator's hand closed around mine once more, their grip like a lifeline as they pulled me back from the precipice. I felt myself torn between worlds - between the present moment and the rush of visions flooding my mind. "Wait," I managed to gasp, but it was too late. The visions had already begun to merge with reality.

The woman's face blurred, her features shifting like sand in a dune. Faces I'd thought lost forever reappeared - Jax, Elara, Arin - each one a flicker of pain and regret. I stumbled forward, my heart heavy with the weight of their memories, my mind reeling from the onslaught of recollections. The Curator's grip was all that held me upright as the visions continued to spill forth, an endless tide of what-ifs and could-haves that threatened to consume me whole.

"Stop," I begged, but it was too late. The visions had already claimed me, sweeping me up in a maelstrom of memories that threatened to drown me.

Tags: [Ashen Roads](#), [Weight of Consequence](#), [Traveler's Guilt](#)