



Go Ashes

by

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I was twenty miles from the city of ashes when my eyes started sliding shut of their own volition. My body demanded coffee, and I obligingly cut off a honking sedan to make the exit. I followed the ramp to a small string of shops sandwiched between a church and a motel. The café looked familiar, so I parked out front. I hadn't been to this place since I had escaped the City on the Hill with—

Leigh. My stomach twisted, and I wondered if I could make it to my car before she realized I had arrived. I hadn't recognized her pull. She was always so good at sliding her intentions naturally into my thoughts.

I spotted her through the window. Her back was to the glass and there was nothing familiar in the sheet of purple hair, but I knew her at once, as I always know her. My hand throbbed with the tempo of her heartbeat, and I could feel, in sharp detail, every point in the pattern she had tattooed into my knuckles those years ago.

I walked into the café and the news anchor's grave voice caught my attention. I turned to watch the shaky footage again; and the fiery cyclone ripped through the heart of the City as the earth shuddered. Our childhood blazed and sank to ashes before my eyes.

I felt relief more than anything. The place should have been razed long ago.

The tables were mostly empty, but several people crowded around the bar, eyes on the aftermath of black smoke seething into the sky. A middle-aged woman at the bar started crying, sagging against her man.

"Most of the house is still there," he said, voice breaking.

"But the police—why won't they let us come back?"

I passed them quickly and found Leigh staring at me. Her blue eyes threw my heart off rhythm. But then she managed a weak smile, and I realized how badly I missed her.

She put down her coffee long enough to embrace me. The hug was tense for a moment, but then we clung to each other.

"Do you know how many times I wished the damned City would just be swallowed up into the earth?" she murmured.

"I know. Leigh, it's gone now," I said. "We can let go."

"No. This isn't how it should have happened." Her fingers dug into my shirt, and her voice was muffled against my shoulder. "We abandoned them, Andrew."

I extricated myself, gently. "You can't think that."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and I realized how gaunt she looked. I pulled out a chair and sat across from her. She sank back into her seat. Her eyes were ringed with darkness, and it wasn't all makeup. The lines of a halter top peeked from under her black cardigan, exposing the broken knot-work I had inked across her collarbone. I did not recognize the wingtips of demons and butterflies that spilled out onto her wrists. A large round eye stared up at me from her left palm.

"We should have gone back," she said softly.

"Leigh," I caught her eyes and held them. "The Patron, that esteemed channel to God, pinned me to a table and tried to stick a knife in my chest. If you hadn't broken out of his circle and followed him—"

"I know," she snapped. "He would have killed us."

She broke off abruptly and smiled as the waitress approached. Her coffee cup moved helpfully towards the edge of the table. The waitress looked at our exposed tattoos and frowned. If I had any doubts that we were back home in the Bible Belt, she laid them to rest at once. I ordered coffee and

she took her judging eyes away.

"I know we had to leave." Leigh's voice was calmer, "But that was then. We—well, I—have learned so much since then. All the others girls were trapped there, helping his curses along and never knowing. I wonder how many others he's sacrificed."

"Leigh, they wouldn't believe it. He labeled us demons. They wouldn't have suffered us to walk within a block of the church." I was surprised how harsh my voice sounded. "They made their own choices to stay."

"Andrew," she said, "I can't do this alone."

"Do what?"

"Come with me to the City," she said. "It's only right that we go back together."

Our hands rested on the table near each other, not quite touching. I looked at the matching swirls and crescents; mine inked with her blood, hers inked with mine. Her heartbeat pulsed in my hand. I missed her like a pair of lungs, but the fervor in her voice filled me with unease.

"I can take you to the vigil," I said, but I knew it wasn't what she meant.

"The police will never find out what happened. Don't you want to know?"

The waitress came back with a mug and a thermos, and left without a word. Leigh refilled her cup and drank it black.

"You heard the news, Leigh," I said. I poured coffee, and found no milk in sight. "The earthquake ruptured a gas line."

"Don't be daft," she said. "It smacks of magic."

"Yes, I'm sure they thought they were being directly translated." I sipped the drink, and it was bitter as ash. "And it is a blessing, if the flames took the Patron."

I reached out and squeezed her hand. I felt her angry wild grief, and she must have read my mixed emotions, because she pulled her hand away with a frown.

"Andrew, we don't know if the Patron was there when the City burned."

I was quiet. He had not let us go gently. For two years I dreamed that the hounds of hell tracked our scent. They kept us moving, dodging across the country. Sometimes they were just shadows with snapping black teeth. Sometimes the smoldering embers of their eyes found us, and we ran for days with scorched wounds on our legs and heels. By the time we got to California, the dogs' skin stretched taught over ribs, and their stomachs shrank against their spines, but they were relentless. It was not until we inked the warding knots into our skin that the dogs slunk out of my dreams.

"I think he did this," she said.

"Why would he? They're his thralls. They provide him his sacrifices and a circle of women. He keeps up his charm, and they never know what he is. It's worked for years." I stirred sugar into the coffee, but it was still bitter.

"Maybe the cult realized he never ages. Or perhaps some mother refused to believe that her son ran off with just a note."

I sighed. "Leigh, what do you want to do?"

"I'm tired of always looking over my shoulder. I want to know if he's dead."

"How can we ever know?" I snapped. "If he doesn't want to surface, he won't. Any evidence, such as it was, would have burned. All we can do now is pay our respects to the poor people he deluded."

"Memories linger in the ashes, Andrew. Come back to the City with me," she said. "It'll be properly dark by the time we get there. Don't you want to know?"

I hesitated, then nodded. I had come this far from home because I wanted to see the shattered city with my own eyes. To fill my memory with ashes.

She refused to let me pay for coffee because she wanted the pleasure of stiffing the waitress, but I over-tipped to compensate. Leigh led me out to the parking lot. She suggested we take her car to the City, and led me to a small vehicle. It took a moment for the surprise to sink in.

"A Prius?" I asked, and she smirked, but said nothing. I bit my tongue to keep from asking her where she'd acquired the thing. I feared a rich boyfriend.

Leigh steered the tiny car like it was a truck, and I suspected she had only recently learned to drive. For the longest time she had insisted that we would do better to stay off the grid and learn to teleport.

She took a series of back roads that wound through the trees. As she drove, Leigh told me she had taken binoculars to the city that morning.

"Why didn't you get your memories then?" I asked.

She smiled. "There wasn't time for the memories to settle under my skin. Besides, police were looking for a rabid dog."

I stared at her, but she kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead. The dark fangs of the hellhounds flashed before my eyes, and I wasn't sure if it was her thought or mine.

"Leigh," I said, "what are you dragging me into?"

She shrugged, and the car swerved a little. "All they're saying is that some secondary fires have sprung up in unexpected places."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"Absolutely."

"Roadblock," I said, and pointed. "We can't get through here."

Traffic cones peppered the road, and a cruiser sat across both lanes. A cop lounged inside, feet up on the dash.

"No problem." She adjusted her shirt. "I can talk us in anywhere."

"Should I give you two some privacy?"

"Andrew, be reasonable."

She stopped a few yards from the cruiser, and rolled down the window.

The cop adjusted his sunglasses and walked over. He pulled out a flashlight and flicked the beam around the car, then rested the light on Leigh.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. There's been a fire. Area still ain't safe."

"My house wasn't even touched." Leigh leaned forward. "But when you made us evacuate, my cat got left behind. I don't want Mittens to starve!"

She was all pathos, and choked up as she went on about the cat. Whatever magic she was working worked, and he stopped her mid-tirade.

"Alright, miss. I'm an animal-guy myself." He sighed, and flashed the light in my face. "I shouldn't be doing this, but seeing as you got a nice strong man to protect you, I'll give you an hour."

Leigh smiled, and he flicked the light back to her face. "One hour. And be careful. There's been some reports of rabid dogs. Now, the boys might've been seeing things, but then, they might not."

He moved cones and car to let us pass. Leigh drove through, giving the officer a wave.

"I hope the rabid dog doesn't get Mittens," I said.

"I do have a cat back home," she said. "Somnambulist."

"Mittens is better," I told her.

Leigh smiled and accelerated down the empty road. The standing houses were replaced by fallen rubble and husks of buildings. Then the ruins gave way to drifts of ash, which covered the pavement ahead. Leigh parked on what could have been the side of the road, and we got out. The air reeked of smoke. A round moon peeked through shreds of clouds, and illuminated a wasteland of ash, dotted with lonely chimneys.

Leigh looped a bag over her shoulder and gave me a flashlight. She handed me a satellite photo of the town, marked with numbered dots. The numbers spiraled around the City and stopped at the big house on the crest.

The retort of a gun split the air, and we dropped to the ground. We looked at each other and waited, and sound came again. A dog yelped in the distance.

"I guess they solved that," Leigh said.

I gave her a look. "As long as they don't think we're dogs."

"I can keep us hidden," she said, and pointed her one-eyed palm towards me.

I bit back a remark about the difficulty of hiding from bullets, and pulled myself up. We tried to beat the cakes of white ash from our clothes, but gave up quickly. I followed Leigh down the street, and she pointed at what remained of the bakery's sign. It was the last place we had been before we slipped out of town for good.

Leigh knelt and picked up a handful of ash.

"This is the first point on the map," she said. "You're going to apply the tattoo."

"With ashes from the ground?" I sighed, trying to mask a tremor of fear. "That's a fast way to get an infection."

"I need the remnants, Andrew," she said. "It sets the structures of memories. We're going to rebuild the city on my back."

"Do you really want this place under your skin? The Patron? The cultists? You don't have to give them power over you again."

"They won't have power," she said stiffly. "I'm trapping this wreckage within me. I can sift through their burnt memories. I can rebuild the City as it once was, but only if I want to. It's my choice. My ink is my dominion. You should know that by now."

"How can you be sure?" I tried to look inside her, to get past her flinty eyes.

She softened, and I relaxed in the face of her certainty. "Andrew," she said, "I've learned a lot since you left me and swore off all of this."

Leigh pulled off her cardigan. Her arms were encircled by sleeves of tattoos. The left arm, her favorite canvas, was full of spikes and vicious creatures, while the right was sparse, wrapped with

organic vines and seed pods. I did not recognize the artist, and I fought down a pang of jealousy.

She turned and swept her hair over her shoulder. Her halter left her back exposed. Under the beam of my flashlight, her skin shone pale as the map, and bore the same blue dots sharpied in a vague spiral to cluster in the heart of the City.

"Our houses, the barn, the church," she gestured at the map. "I'll need ashes from each point." She gave me a wry smile. "It will be easy. I'm taking in the City. All you have to do is give it away."

"You have to share what you see."

She hesitated, then nodded.

I wondered if making her own version of the city would give her closure. But the thought of the ritual made my flesh crawl. I did not want to leave her with this landscape of death nestled always under her skin. Not when we had worked so hard to get away.

Leigh set about sterilizing a needle with a wooden handle.

"Hand poking," I said. "In the dark. What could be better?"

"I've done it before with my eyes closed," she said, wrapping long strands of her own hair around the needle. "This will be easy."

She gave me the tool, and I flicked my wrist, trying to remember the motion. I hadn't put needle to anyone but her, and that hadn't been for a long time.

"It will hurt," I told her.

Leigh threw a hand-towel at me, and I flipped it over my shoulder. She pulled out a glazed mortar and pestle from her bag, and knelt. Under her pestle, the ash grew fine, and she dripped in a dark ink that smelled of vodka.

"I'll mix ashes for each point on the map," she said. "All you have to do is load the needle and mark the dot until it runs dry."

She held up the ink, and I dipped the needle. My heart was pounding. This was the sort of thing that had driven us apart in the first place. I didn't want to hurt her. I wanted to hold her and tell her we could leave the City, again and forever.

The first mark was hesitant, and she tensed.

"Quickly," she said. "You know how to do this"

I jabbed her skin, and the motion became automatic until a thick dash covered the blue sharpie point. I wiped my hands on the towel, and my fingers were stained gray already.

"I smell fresh bread," she said, looking up.

"Toast," I said, inhaling the memory of the bakery.

Leigh nodded, then set off. Her eyes darted between the map and the chaos of ashes. The lay of the streets was familiar, when we could see the street, but the beams and bricks lay tumbled and confused. Our footsteps puffed ashes into the air, and the smoke clung to my throat. Leigh stopped by a fragment of wall, and mixed ink quickly, giving me a nervous glance. I loaded the needle, but my hand trembled as I realized the wall was all that was left of my parents' home.

In the shadow of the wall, I had to flick on the flashlight to see the sharpie point on her back. As I jabbed in the ink, shadows shifted, and I could hear the creak of our old porch rocker and the thump of my father's cane. I drained the needle and gave Leigh a hand up to hurry her away from the place. I did not look back.

We walked down the street, and stayed close to the low remains of walls. I spotted movement, and snapped the beam of my flashlight to a cluster of cinderblocks, but I only saw ashes puffed and floating like snowflakes.

"Did you see something?" Leigh turned.

I shook my head, and we made our way towards the reading room. As I inked I saw flashes of starched Sunday frocks and lonely rooms. Leigh's flashlight rolled on the floor, and the uneven light kept drawing my glance. We ran through the street.

When we got to remains of the school, Leigh perched on a mound of cinderblocks and scooped ashes from the top. She came down, and I applied the tattoo. I breathed in deeply the smell of musty books in the hot air. As we climbed out of the shell of the building, I thought I saw embers still burning down the street, but when I pointed them out to Leigh, they were gone. She reached out and took my hand with a half-smile.

When we reached Leigh's childhood home, she stood for a moment and looked up at a thin stone archway that stood alone by the pile of chimney bricks. She knelt to mix the ashes, and a gunshot popped in the distance. We both jumped, then she bent to her task.

"Must be some dog," she muttered.

I started applying the ink, but stopped, blinking. Leigh looked altered. She sat barefoot, and her light brown hair was loose over a high collared dress.

She turned and touched my face. "Andrew," she said, "don't let old memories in. Stay with me."

"I miss you," I said, and regretted it.

I flinched as a howl split the air, and she cursed as the needle jabbed hard. I apologized, but she looked thoughtful.

"That sounds like..." Leigh trailed off.

"A wolf," I said, wishing I believed it.

We wound our way through the city, unraveling the trail of our escape. I started avoiding looking at the dark shadows we passed, with some childish logic of remaining unseen. I looked at my ink-stained hands instead, and tried to clean the grit of ashes out from under my nails. The grit remained, and the darkness pressed around us.

We reached the edge of the houses and looked over a field. Bits of blackened and brown grass poked up through the ashes. Leigh led me to the place the barn must have stood, and filled her mortar. As I inked the point, Leigh twitched with each prick of the needle. I wondered how much she could stand.

I reached into the ashes to dry the ink on my fingers. It felt like reaching into a sack of flour, then hard as dried kernels of corn. I saw echoes of chickens scratching the earth with jerky motions. Then the birds scattered. I looked at the walls of the barn and saw nothing until the darkness moved.

"Something is following us," I said.

"Memories," she said. "They're falling out of my ears."

I scowled as we climbed the hill to the church, which was the highest point except for the Patron's big house.

I stopped and look back at the path we had taken. Leigh touched my hand, and I could see echoes of the buildings standing full-bodied. The barn looked faded, and the library had boarded up windows.

I blinked. A boy stood in the road, kicking the ashes up into clouds. Then he smiled, and ran to a dark

car. His mother came a moment later, mouth open wide in a silent shout.

"She used to live down the street," Leigh said.

Another gunshot sounded, and the memory was startled away. Down in the valley, I saw a tongue of flame jet into the air, then vanish.

"Gas lines," Leigh said.

I thought I heard a low growl, but when I stopped to listen, it faded. Leigh gripped my hand tight with her tattooed eye. Her face shone with sweat, and she wiped her brow with the vines and pods on her forearm.

We approached the church and climbed down into the sunken floor. Leigh found ashes from the altar, then knelt in the center of the room. I applied the needle, but stopped when Leigh started shaking.

"Don't look up," she hissed. "Keep going."

I had to hold her down to keep her still, and once I had completed the point I lifted my head. I flinched. We were in the middle of the shadows of the congregation, impassive and pale as the ashes. They rose to their feet when the Patron came to the pulpit.

I realized the only young people in the room were the dozen young women in gray who sat in the first two rows. The Patron stood before the room, as vigorous as he had looked all my life. I couldn't hear him, but I recognized the thrust of his strong jaw, and that sneer he got whenever he gave hellfire warnings of the sinful youth. The girls had to be kept at to remain pure, he had always told us, and adolescence drew boys to the devil.

Leigh grabbed my arm and I turned to see the woman from the street walk into the room, beyond the pews. Her face was sharp in focus, pinched in grief.

Leigh covered her mouth. "Oh no. Oh no."

The woman stepped into the center aisle. The heartless body of her child hung limp in her arms. Everyone looked from her to the Patron, and rage split his face open. His circle rose to their feet, yelling and pointing fingers.

The Patron backed up. Some of the congregation surged forward, but others turned against them. As the room broke into a riot of swinging arms and canes, the Patron fled through the back. The circle raced after him, their gray dresses swelling like sheets on a line.

The memories faded, and Leigh looked pale. I grabbed her hand and we climbed out of the church. My stomach felt heavy as lead.

"How did she find the boy?"

"I don't know," Leigh said. "Maybe someone helped her find it." She shook her head. "But what gall! Outing him like that would have left him no choice but to do something terrible."

"They can't know everything he's done."

"Killing one child is enough," she said.

I shivered and looked down the street. Twin yellow dots smoldered in the dark. I pointed, and this time Leigh saw them.

She cursed, and grabbed my hand, claspng it over the eye of her palm. She covered my mouth with her other hand, and we stood motionless as the hound walked out of the shadows. He stopped at the end of the street, nostrils flaring. But he moved aimlessly, as if the embers in his skull could not focus on us. Nose to the ground, he followed a scent behind a wall of the church. We started backing

up the slope, expecting the dog to give chase. Instead I heard a snap and a yelp, and the hellhound bolted, bleeding a trail of fire.

"Leigh," I didn't let go of her hand. "We need to get out of here."

"It's just a nightmare," she said hesitantly, as the dog's reedy howl rose on the wind. "Come. We just need one more point."

She tugged my hand, and we started up the steep hill to the Patron's blasted house. The ash slipped under our feet, but we climbed faster when I found part of an iron railing that hadn't fallen. We reached a half-crumbled terrace, and I looked down at the slope to see if we had missed an easier path. There were gaps in the ashes. I had to walk closer to realize they were paw prints as big as my hand.

"Leigh—"

"Look," she interrupted.

She motioned me over to the edge of the terrace. I followed her gaze down into the valley. We could see the whole of the City spread out below. It looked like a rocky snowfield, inexplicably set down in the heart of a Georgia summer.

She pointed. The cop was moving through the valley below, gun held ready.

The wounded dog's howl was joined by others, and a pair of rangy hellhounds flitted through the wreckage, converging on the man. He fired his gun, twice, and one of the dogs exploded into flames. The cop started running, and dogs gave chase.

Then Leigh lost her hold on the present, and flames roared everywhere. Houses crumbled and people ran out into the streets where hounds lay waiting. The wind pushed the pillars of smoke on top of us and I couldn't breathe.

"Andrew," Leigh pulled my face towards her, "I'm sorry." My chest heaved, and I sucked in fresh air, resting for a moment in her clear eyes.

"Come," she said.

We climbed over piles of bricks, and I followed her into a room mostly barren of rubble, though the floor was warped and broken. She was smiling as she mixed the ink, but I felt nauseated and cold. I swung the beam of my flashlight around the room, but saw neither impenetrable shadows nor glowing embers. I saw a glint of metal by the wall and walked closer. I had to shift a couple of bricks to see it was a silver knife. I recognized it from the last time it had been pressed against my chest. I pulled it out and wrapped the towel around it. I didn't trust the blade.

Leigh walked over and offered me the ink. I dipped the needle and tattooed the final point of the map into her back. She shuddered, and the room grew hot as a furnace.

Quiet at first, but gaining strength, I began to hear the voices of women raised together as one. We turned, and Leigh gasped.

The women sat on the floor, hands gripped tight in a circle. The Patron lay on the floor, bleeding and bound. One woman stood over him and raised the silver dagger high. The Patron cursed and twisted, but she steadied him with a foot and drove the knife into his heart.

The Patron's dying words were crackled and inhuman. His body convulsed, and the ground rolled and pitched. A deep rumble rose from the earth and the windows chattered. The floor wrenched open and his body fell. The chasm widened and the circle collapsed, falling. Flames gushed from the ground, swirling and tearing at the walls. Hellhounds howled out, the black spaces between strands of fire.

The images vanished abruptly, and Leigh let out a sob, hands clapped over her eyes.

"They tried so hard," she said.

I wrapped my arms around her, and we sat for a moment. A deep growl emerged from the darkness, and she grabbed my hand. I picked up the knife.

"Hell of a lot of good that circle did," I spat.

The dog emerged, cut from shadow and large as a bear. With a snarl, he lunged towards me. I broke from Leigh to meet him with the knife. He twisted away and snapped at her. But she slapped the dog's snout, and held her palm's eye aloft.

The hound fell back with a growl, belly slithering against the ground.

"My eye sees you, Patron," Leigh said. "You can't hide in your dog-suit."

I shouted, and tried to drive the knife deep, but he danced, and the blade sliced across his flank. Liquid fire splashed from the wound onto my hand.

I screamed and dropped the knife. Leigh rushed forward, warding the hound back.

She seized my burning hand and pressed it to her back. My hand went cold, and I clutched it to my chest. She hissed as my handprint bubbled and smoked against her fresh tattoo.

Then she yelled something I didn't recognize, and the air felt charged.

"I hope you like this city of ashes, hound," she snarled. "You will never leave this dead place."

The massive dog leapt for her throat, but as he hit, his form disintegrated into soot. Leigh staggered under the impact. His ashes fell away, and the points on her map blazed orange. Her legs buckled, but I caught her.

She drew a shuddering breath, wincing against the pain.

"Leigh, are you alright?"

"Yes," She opened dark eyes. "He is bound."

"Leigh."

"In my shadow city he will find nothing but ash," she said. She pulled herself to her feet, and dusted soot from her clothes. Her smug smile chilled me.

I rose, looking at the glowing stars on her back. A prison sealed with my hand. I wondered if it had been her goal, and if it would hold. I started to speak, but Leigh leaned in close, and my questions faded in her kiss.