Ashen Archives – Chapter 1

A stranger leaned against the weathered wall of the town tavern and watched the crowd filter past. There was nothing remarkable about this town, he thought. He passed through many just like it. His focus lingered on the little things people no longer noticed. He learned long ago—the smallest things were often missed the most once they were gone.

A shopkeeper swept the same patch of dirt from his doorstep for the third time. Across the street, two old men sat beneath an awning arguing over something neither seemed particularly angry about. A woman struggled to balance a basket against one hip while dragging a reluctant child behind her. Somewhere nearby, a dog barked, followed by the angry shout of whoever it had annoyed.

A flock of birds exploded into the air in a tangle of feathers and wings as a red-haired girl slipped through the crowd. She moved easily among the townsfolk, twisting through narrow gaps and ducking around merchants and patrons as though she'd spent her entire life learning the rhythm of these streets. She bumped into a passing man and offered him an apologetic smile before disappearing into the crowd again. Her vibrant red hair trailed behind her like tendrils of flame among the drab of the town. A battered cloth doll hung from the small satchel at her side, little more than a bundle of rags to anyone else.

She stopped abruptly as the sweet smell of freshly baked pastries wafted around her. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. A familiar whistle caught her attention. Her eyes snapped open. A smile spread across her face. She slipped through the crowd and found the baker smiling back at her.

The baker groaned as he straightened from arranging a basket near the ground. He was happy to see her, though his knees apparently weren't. “Getting into mischief a little early today, are we?”

The girl grinned sheepishly, a rosy blush forming beneath the freckles on her cheeks. The baker noticed a fresh smudge of dirt along the side of her dress and shook his head with mock disapproval. His gaze drifted to the battered doll peeking from her satchel.

“When are you going to get rid of that filthy old thing?”

Rosalie feigned shock. She pulled the doll from her satchel and pressed it tightly against her chest, giving it a murderously tight hug.

“All right, all right.” He raised his flour-covered hands in surrender. “Forget I said anything.”

The baker chuckled, his rotund belly shaking beneath his apron. One flour-dusted hand reached out and tousled her hair.

“So, what brings you to my humble shop, little one?” The baker asked as if he didn’t already know the answer.

The girl leaned to one side to look around him; her eyes immediately found the freshly baked sweets adorning the baker's display window. The man chuckled to himself again. “Well, come on then. I need someone to taste these pastries after all. Must make sure they’re good enough for my patrons.”

Rosalie's face lit up. She quickly shoved the doll back into her satchel and eagerly followed him inside.

Minutes later the girl emerged with a piece of honey-coated bread in one hand and a smear of honey at the corner of her mouth.

“Run along now. Wouldn’t want your mother worrying about you.”

The stranger smiled as he watched the baker wave goodbye.

His gaze settled briefly on the battered doll peeking from the girl's satchel. Funny, the things people chose to hold on to.

A patron greeted the baker as he stepped aside to let them in.

The girl passed by the tailor’s shop on her way to find her mom. The tailor was impossibly tall and thin as though someone had taken hold of him at birth and forgotten to stop pulling. As she got closer, she heard the tailor talking to someone.

“Nobody in this whole damn town appreciates true art, do they? Not like you of course.”

She peeked around a rack of clothes. He was talking to a mannequin.

The tailor lovingly wrapped a colorful cloak around the mannequin.

“Oh, look at you in that cloak! What was that? It doesn’t look half as good as me? Oh, you little charmer, you.”

The tailor swatted playfully at the mannequin. It rocked backward, then swung forward and bumped into him.

The girl covered her mouth to stifle a chuckle.

Her attention wandered to the cloak wrapped around the mannequin, a deep violet stitched with brilliant gold that begged to be touched. She slowly reached toward it, her hand still sticky with honey and crumbs.

The tailor caught her wrist just before she made contact.

His eyes widened in horror.

Then they narrowed as he recognized her.

“Rosalie.”

His mouth scrunched as though he'd tasted something awful.

Rosalie smiled sweetly.

“Hello.”

His gaze dropped to the sticky hand caught in his grip. A strand of honey stretched lazily between two of her fingers.

“Is that... honey?”

Rosalie glanced at her hand.

“Probably.”

His eyes widened again.

“*Probably?*”

She shrugged.

The tailor stared at her.

Then at the cloak.

Then back at her.

He slowly pulled her hand farther away from the fabric.

“Do you have any idea what would have happened if you had touched this?”

Rosalie considered the question.

“It would've gotten sticky?”

The tailor made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a whimper.

Rosalie covered her mouth, but the giggle escaped anyway.

“This is not amusing.”

That only made her laugh harder.

He released her wrist and immediately turned his attention to the cloak, inspecting it as though Rosalie's hand might somehow have damaged it through proximity alone.

“Why anyone would ever consider creating offspring is beyond me.”

Rosalie grinned.

“You like me.”

The tailor stopped.

His shoulders slowly sank.

“Rosalie.”

“Yes?”

He pointed toward the street.

“Leave.”

She laughed and started away.

“And wash your hands!”

Rosalie waved without looking back.

He stared after her for a moment before turning to the mannequin.

“That child is going to be the death of me.”

Moments later the girl found herself in the middle of the bustling town square. She slipped naturally into the flow of shoppers, merchants, and travelers. Rows upon rows of wooden carts with awnings of every color lined the streets. Merchants called out over one another as the smells of every fruit, vegetable, and spice under the sun filled the air.

“Hmm, looks like your tomatoes came in nice... What do you say about maybe trading six of your tomatoes for eight of my onions?”

“Your onions?” The other shopkeeper laughed. “I wouldn’t trade one tomato for *all* of your onions, you old codger.”

The first man snorted in disgust and walked away grumbling to himself.

The girl snickered as she heard the conversation.

She leaned against the edge of the cart and inspected the tomatoes. Her eyes grew wide. They really were the most amazing tomatoes she'd ever seen. Her mouth watered.

“Hey, don’t get your drool all over my tomatoes, you little gnat, you.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Unless, of course, you have some coin and would like to purchase one.”

The girl reached into the pockets of her dress and pulled them inside out. Nothing but lint fell out of them. She shrugged innocently.

The man looked at her sternly. “No money, no tomatoes. Get a move on you.”

“Leave her alone, you grumpy old dotard.” An old woman stood nearby, the bend in her back forcing her forward at an unnatural angle. She recognized the girl and hobbled over.

“I’ll pay the old wretch for one of his tomatoes, and you can bring it over to your mom. How’s that sound? I think I saw her over by Farmer John’s cart a little while ago, dear.”

She turned back to the vendor, her expression hardening into a scowl. She threw a coin, which bounced off his chest and landed at his feet. She grabbed a tomato and turned back to the girl, her scowl disappearing as quickly as it had appeared.

The girl took the tomato and started to run off but stopped. She turned back and wrapped her arms around the old woman.

“Thank you,” she whispered before running off.

The old woman rested a hand over her heart and watched the girl disappear into the crowd.

Then she turned and swatted the vendor on the arm.

“May your crops turn as rotten as you, you stingy, surly, old lout of a man.”

The girl continued on her way to find her mom.

She saw her in the distance and was about to run straight for her when she heard an unmistakable sound.

Ting. Ting. Ting.

She blushed and changed course, quickening her pace toward the sound.

In the distance, she saw the familiar glow of the blacksmith's forge. She looked up into the clear sky and saw black smoke billowing from the chimney.

As she drew closer, her pace slowed to a cautious walk. She slipped behind a barrel and peeked around it.

The blacksmith's apprentice stood near the back of the shop, hammering away at a practice piece of metal. The blacksmith towered over his shoulder, watching every stroke.

She shifted for a better look, causing the barrel to scrape against the ground.

The blacksmith turned and spotted her. He smiled and winked, knowing exactly why she was there.

Messy black hair framed a weathered face and a thick, rough beard. Even his massive forearms were covered in dark hair. The girl smiled. He looked more like a bear than a man.

The blacksmith's apprentice put down his hammer and wiped his brow with the back of his hand, smearing a streak of soot across his forehead.

He noticed her watching him from behind the barrel.

He awkwardly looked around, cleared his throat, then sheepishly waved.

Her face flushed as she waved back.

His eyes dropped toward the satchel hanging at her side.

The battered head of her doll peeked out from beneath the flap.

“Cute,” he said.

Rosalie's smile vanished.

She shoved the doll deeper into the satchel.

The blacksmith grinned wide, doing a terrible job of hiding his amusement.

“It's not—” Rosalie started.

The apprentice had already turned back toward the forge.

The blacksmith nudged him and nodded toward his work. The boy got the hint and picked up his hammer.

The girl watched sparks fly from the metal with each strike.

The blacksmith glanced at her, then at the hammer in his hand.

A grin spread beneath his beard.

“You want to give it a try?”

Rosalie looked at the hammer.

Then at the apprentice.

“Yeah. I do.”

The blacksmith picked up another hammer and held it out to her. She eagerly wrapped both hands around the handle. It was heavier than she'd expected. Much heavier.

She adjusted her grip and planted her feet.

The blacksmith raised an eyebrow.

“Still want to try?”

Rosalie caught the apprentice watching.

“Of course.”

She lifted the hammer.

Slowly.

Painfully.

But she lifted it.

The blacksmith's eyebrow climbed a little higher.

Rosalie grinned through clenched teeth.

She raised it over her shoulder and brought it down.

CLANG.

The hammer struck the edge of the anvil instead of the metal.

The impact rattled through her arms and nearly tore the handle from her hands.

She staggered back.

The blacksmith caught her by the shoulder.

“Easy.”

Rosalie straightened immediately.

“I meant to do that.”

The apprentice smiled.

That was enough.

“Again.”

This time she hit the metal.

Sparks scattered across the floor.

Rosalie's face lit up.

She immediately looked toward the apprentice.

He nodded, impressed.

That was her first mistake.

Her second was deciding she could do it harder.

Rosalie raised the hammer again, putting everything she had into the swing.

The hammer came down.

The metal jumped.

So did the hammer.

The rebound threw her off balance. She stumbled backward, fighting desperately to stay upright, and crashed into the pile of wood behind her.

Silence.

Then the blacksmith roared with laughter.

The apprentice set down his hammer and walked over. He held out his hand. For a moment, she only stared at it. Then she reached up and let him pull her to her feet.

Once she was back on her feet, he smiled and released her hand.

“Not bad.”

Rosalie blinked.

“Really?”

He shrugged. “For your first try.”

Then he returned to his work.

She stood there staring at her hand.

The blacksmith's laughter faded.

The hammering stopped.

Rosalie looked up. The blacksmith and his apprentice were staring into the distance.

She slowly turned, following their gaze.

Birds erupted into the sky beyond the rooftops.

An orange glow stained the horizon.

A woman screamed.

The sound cut through the town.

Conversations stopped. Merchants fell silent. Heads turned toward the growing glow beyond the rooftops.

At the tomato cart, the vendor stood with another ripe tomato clutched in his hand. The old woman beside him had been preparing another swat at his arm, but her hand slowly fell to her side.

The tomato slipped from the vendor's fingers.

It struck the cobblestones and split open at his feet.

He didn't notice.

Outside his shop, the tailor stood frozen beside his mannequin. The brilliant violet-and-gold cloak he had guarded so fiercely only moments before slid from his hands. It pooled in the dirt.

He made no attempt to pick it up.

For a moment he simply stared.

Then his eyes searched the crowd.

“Rosalie?”

The baker stepped from his doorway carrying another tray of pastries. His smile disappeared as he saw the horizon.

The tray tipped.

Pastries scattered across the street.

For a moment he simply stared.

The town erupted.

People shouted over one another. Merchants abandoned their carts. Parents grabbed their children. Others stood frozen, unable to pull their eyes from the orange glow spreading beyond the rooftops.

Against the tavern wall, the stranger watched it all.

The arguing old men were gone from beneath the awning. The shopkeeper's broom lay abandoned across his doorstep. Somewhere in the chaos, the dog continued barking.

The stranger pushed himself away from the wall.

His gaze moved across the square, lingering on the faces he'd spent the morning watching.

Then he started toward the edge of town.

Away from them.

He made it several steps before stopping.

The stranger looked over his shoulder.

Rosalie still stood inside the blacksmith's shop. The blacksmith had moved in front of her, one massive arm stretched across her as though he could shield her from whatever was coming. The apprentice stood beside him.

Rosalie wasn't looking at the flames anymore.

She was looking at him.

Their eyes met.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she watched him standing apart from the panic around them. There was something questioning in her expression, something searching.

The stranger took a step toward her.

Rosalie straightened, her uncertainty giving way to something else.

He stopped.

The change in her expression was subtle, but he saw it.

His jaw tightened.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, too quietly for her to hear.

Then he turned away.