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# The Echo of Ashen Dreams

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## Introduction

Mira never expected her life to change. She lived quietly in the heart of a bustling city, her world a patchwork of faded routines and gentle predictability. Her days unfolded beneath a grey sky, where each morning mirrored the last, and the boundaries between dreams and waking felt as solid as the stone pathways under her feet. Yet, just beneath the surface of Mira's ordinary existence, a storm was gathering. It began as a whisper on the edge of sleep—a haunting melody that wound through her dreams, drawing her into a world entirely unlike her own.

At first, Mira dismissed these strange nocturnal adventures as nothing more than the remnants of an overactive imagination. But with each passing night, the visions grew clearer, more insistent. She saw cities of glass nestled within forests of white ash, rivers that flowed backward through time, and skies lit by unfamiliar constellations. Most vivid of all were the echoes: forgotten voices woven through the silence, calling out for help from the depths of the unknown.

As days bled into nights, Mira's sense of reality began to blur. With every sunrise, she carried remnants of her dreamscape—ash clinging to the cuffs of her sleeves, the lingering taste of unfamiliar air on her tongue. She became haunted not only by what she had seen, but by an unshakable certainty: her dreams were not dreams at all. They were memories from a world on the edge of dissolution—a world desperate for someone to listen, to remember, to save it.

It was then, on the cusp of abandoning hope for answers, that Mira encountered the first true echo—a guardian bearing the marks of that fading world. He chose her not for greatness, but for her stubborn belief that there must be more. Mira learned the truth her dreams had whispered all along: she alone could cross the boundary between their worlds, and only she possessed the power needed to heal the breach threatening both realities.

With each new revelation, Mira's journey stretched before her in daunting, exhilarating promise. The fragile threads connecting her two lives tightened, drawing her ever deeper into mystery and danger. Guided by courage she had never known, and by friendships forged in both light and shadow, Mira set forth on an odyssey into the unknown—a journey that would test her resolve, reveal her ancestry, and demand that she confront darkness with hope.

In the echo of ashen dreams, Mira would discover not only the fate of a forgotten world, but the true shape of her own courage and destiny.

## CHAPTER ONE: Whispers Before Dawn

The insistent chirp of her alarm clock usually sliced through Mira's slumber with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, but this morning, it felt more like a distant echo. She lay tangled in her sheets, the faint scent of something like petrichor and burnt sugar clinging to the air around her, despite the window being firmly closed. Her eyes, still heavy with sleep, fluttered open to the familiar beige of her bedroom wall. Another Tuesday, another day at the municipal archives, another stack of dusty microfiches awaiting her meticulous cataloging. It was a life, she often mused, built on the quiet dignity of routine.

Yet, lately, routine had developed fissures. The dreams had begun subtly, a creeping fog at the edges of her consciousness. At first, they were merely vivid, a collage of impossible colors and impossible structures. Then they grew tactile. She'd wake with the faint sensation of wind whipping through her hair, or the phantom ache of a long climb in muscles she hadn't used. Sometimes, a fine, almost invisible dust would coat her bedside table, a pale grey contrasting sharply with the polished wood. Her roommate, Chloe, a perpetually sunny graphic designer, just laughed it off. "You're stressed, Mira! Probably dreaming of all those ancient scrolls finally coming to life."

Mira would offer a weak smile, but the explanation never quite fit. Chloe's dreams involved deadlines and overly demanding clients; Mira's were becoming portals. Last night's excursion had been particularly potent. She remembered a towering city, constructed not of brick or steel, but of shimmering, almost translucent glass. Its spires stretched towards a sky painted in shades of violet and emerald, a spectrum utterly alien to her urban existence. And there were the trees—trees with leaves like delicate, burnt paper, rustling with a dry, hushed sound that still resonated in her ears.

A shiver ran down her spine, not from cold, but from a persistent sense of unease. She swung her legs out of bed, her bare feet landing on the cool wooden floor. The silence of the apartment was broken only by the hum of the refrigerator. Chloe, no doubt, was already out for her morning jog, leaving a trail of cheerful chaos in her wake. Mira padded into the small kitchen, the image of the glass city still vivid behind her eyelids. She brewed a strong black coffee, the mundane ritual a small anchor in the increasingly turbulent waters of her mind.

As she waited for the coffee to drip, her gaze fell upon a small, smooth grey pebble sitting on the countertop. She didn't remember putting it there. It wasn't from her apartment, or any park she frequented. It looked like river stone, but not quite. It had a faint shimmer under the kitchen light, almost as if embedded with tiny, forgotten stars. A memory, fleeting and hazy, surfaced: picking up a similar stone from a

riverbank in her dream, the water rushing with a sound like whispered secrets. She frowned, picking it up. It was cool and smooth to the touch, and strangely comforting.

She tossed the pebble from hand to hand, a nervous habit. This wasn't the first time. A few days ago, she'd found a single, papery leaf, brittle and ash-grey, tucked into the pocket of her sensible work coat. It had disintegrated into dust when she tried to show it to Chloe. Another time, a faint, unfamiliar aroma had lingered on her clothes all day, a scent she couldn't quite place but which evoked feelings of vast, empty spaces and ancient echoes. The pebble, however, was solid, undeniable.

"Okay, Mira," she muttered to herself, taking a large gulp of coffee, "you're officially losing it." The logical part of her brain, the part that meticulously categorized centuries of municipal records, insisted there had to be a rational explanation. Sleepwalking? A prank by Chloe? Yet, her gut, that deeper, more instinctual part, told her otherwise. These weren't pranks, and she'd never been a sleepwalker. This felt...different. Fundamental.

She dressed in her usual sensible attire: a practical skirt, a comfortable blouse, and her sturdy walking shoes. The archives demanded practicality, not fashion. But as she tied her laces, another image flickered – a pair of boots, made of soft, unknown leather, intricate designs etched into their sides. They were boots for journeying, for scaling impossible heights, not for shuffling through dusty shelves. She shook her head, trying to dislodge the persistent imagery.

On her way out, she noticed a faint, almost imperceptible shimmering in the air near the hallway mirror. It was gone in an instant, a trick of the light, perhaps. But for a moment, she felt a distinct pull, a magnetic tug towards the glass. She hesitated, her hand hovering near the frame, an unbidden thought surfacing: what if it wasn't just a reflection? What if it was a window? The thought was absurd, of course, a product of too many late-night fantasy novels.

Stepping out into the crisp morning air, Mira pulled her jacket tighter. The city was waking up, a familiar symphony of distant traffic and the murmur of early commuters. She clutched the pebble in her pocket, its cool weight a strange comfort. It was real. It was here. And it was a tangible link to something profound and unsettling that was slowly, inexorably, seeping into her quiet, predictable life.

The walk to the archives was usually a calming buffer between her apartment and the structured order of her job. Today, it felt like a gauntlet. Every gust of wind seemed to carry whispers she couldn't quite decipher. Every shadow seemed deeper, harboring secrets. She found herself scanning the faces of strangers, wondering if they, too, felt this subtle shift in the fabric of reality. Of course, they didn't. They were engrossed in their phones, their morning coffees, their own mundane worries.

She arrived at the monolithic building that housed the city's past, the grand oak doors a familiar sight. Inside, the air was cool and still, carrying the comforting scent of old paper and dust. She greeted Mr. Henderson, the perpetually stoic head archivist, with a polite nod. He responded with a grunt that Mira interpreted as a good morning. Her cubicle, nestled between rows of towering shelves, offered a small sanctuary.

She powered on her computer, the screen glowing to life, and began her day's task: digitizing old property deeds. The familiar script and detailed maps usually provided a welcome distraction, a logical puzzle to immerse herself in. But today, the lines of text blurred. She kept seeing the glass city, its spires reaching for those impossible skies. She saw the ash-leafed trees, their dry rustle a constant whisper in her mind.

A sudden, sharp headache pulsed behind her eyes. It was a familiar sensation now, a precursor to the most vivid of her dream-echoes. She squeezed her eyes shut, pressing her fingers against her temples. When she opened them, the old parchment on her screen seemed to ripple, the black ink momentarily swirling into unfamiliar symbols before settling back into mundane legality.

Panic, cold and sharp, pricked at her. This was different. This was happening while she was awake, while the sun streamed through the archive windows. The boundary, once so solid, was fraying. She stood up abruptly, drawing a disapproving glance from a librarian several aisles away. She needed air, a moment of reprieve from the encroaching strangeness.

She headed towards the small breakroom, her pace quickening. As she pushed open the door, the world tilted. Not physically, but perceptually. The bland beige walls of the breakroom seemed to ripple, the fluorescent lights flickering. For a heart-stopping second, the coffee machine morphed into an elaborate, alien contraption, humming with an unknown energy. The faint scent of petrichor and burnt sugar, her dream scent, was suddenly overpowering.

She blinked rapidly, shaking her head. The breakroom snapped back into focus. The coffee machine was just a coffee machine. The walls were still beige. But the lingering feeling, the vividness of the momentary shift, was undeniable. She leaned against the cool tile wall, taking several deep, shaky breaths. Her hand instinctively went to her pocket, grasping the smooth grey pebble. It felt warmer now, pulsing faintly with a subtle energy.

A voice, low and resonant, echoed in her mind, though no one was there. *The veil thins, Mira. Listen. Soon, you must choose.* The words were not in English, yet she understood them perfectly, as if they were woven into the very fabric of her being. They were not a dream, not a memory, but a direct, undeniable message. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She was not going mad. This was real. And whatever was

happening, it was escalating. Fast.

Mira knew, with a certainty that chilled her to the bone, that her quiet, predictable life was over. The dreams were no longer just dreams. They were invitations, urgings, warnings. And she was being called. The question, terrifying and exhilarating, hung in the silent air of the breakroom: to where, and for what? The echo of ashen dreams had found her, and it wouldn't let go.

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