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After the Fade

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Introduction

Before the calendars cracked, we trusted the sun to keep our stories straight. It climbed the same windowpanes every morning, stitched noon to supper with a steady hand, and crowded out our darker hunches with the simple promise of light. When that promise faltered—when noon slipped, stuttered, and fell quiet for weeks—our first losses were not fields or engines but habits. Clocks became talismans. The word “tomorrow” began to feel like a dare.

People will tell you The Fade arrived all at once, with a single long night. That is a comfortingly neat myth. In truth, it came as a series of hesitations: a late dawn here, a sickly afternoon there, intervals of velvet cold strung between anomalous, feverish glares. The animals knew first. Birds fell out of song. Bees navigated by a map that no longer matched the sky. The rest of us noticed when bread browned slowly and the power stations stammered, when the rhythm of chores shivered apart and the old seasons failed to show.

What followed looked, from a distance, like collapse. Up close, it was the furious, inventive labor of staying human. We learned to grow heat as carefully as we grew food, banked it in stone lungs and clay bellies, traded in lumen-hours and calories instead of coins. Fields moved down into pits and up onto rooftops; seeds learned to wait; people did, too. Villages sprouted glass ribs—greenhouses guttered with captured dawn—and raised mirrors like altars on every ridge. Law bent toward the light: Lantern Law, some called it, a covenant that rationed brightness the way rivers are measured in dry years and that punished theft not for the thing taken but for the shadow it cast.

This book begins there, where the familiar angles of day no longer held, and follows the seam where need and imagination were stitched together. It is not a manual, though you may find in it the cold frames and soil-heaters, the wind traps and warmth wells, the grain that fattens in near-dark and the mushrooms that sing to roots. It is not a single voice, either. A grain engineer—Mara, who keeps a ledger of starch and rumor—speaks alongside Sefa, a keeper of stories who remembers the old tales and writes new ones that taste of salt and smoke. Caravaneers who walk the night roads by feel, a magistrate who measures guilt in wick-lengths, children who learned their letters from frost patterns on the greenhouse panes—they all carry a part of the light.

You will find, too, the slow remodeling of belief. When noon cannot be promised, people invent rituals to coax it back, or at least to greet whatever comes in its place. Songs timed to seedlings. Weddings aligned to flares. Parables that warn against opening a door too quickly and bleeding a greenhouse of its hard-earned dawn. Some

myths are danger signs wrapped in honey. Others are anchors in a current we still do not fully understand. Sefa will tell you that a culture is a greenhouse, too, and every story a pane to hold the scarce warmth in.

If this is a survival tale, it is less about heroics than about calibration: of tools, of tempers, of the delicate contracts that let a community endure. The irregular sun made us accountants of light and curators of shadow. We learned that mercy is easiest to practice on bright days and most necessary when the wick gutters. We discovered that law, like a greenhouse door, must not swing too wide or too often. We found out what a promise is worth when there is no morning to deliver it.

We are, all of us, creatures tuned by light. After the Fade, we did not become less so; we simply learned new scales. What follows are the measures we tried, the harmonies we found, and the dissonances we could not resolve. Between storms and brief orange mornings, among mirrors and myths, we rebuilt a little at a time, by hand, by breath, by borrowed glow. If you read this in a steady sun, listen for the click of our lanterns under the words. If you read it in the dim, know that someone, somewhere, is angling another pane to catch a dawn for you.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Last Reliable Dawn

Mara woke before the huskers stirred, the chill of the stone floor biting through her thin blanket. She slipped her feet into the worn leather boots she kept by the pallet and padded to the window, where a slab of frosted glass caught the first hint of light. Outside, the valley lay hushed, a thin veil of mist clinging to the low hills like a held breath. For a moment, the world seemed ordinary: the rooster's call would come, the baker would fire the oven, and the day would unfold on its familiar rails.

She pressed her palm to the cool pane, feeling the faint tremor of the sun's ascent through the glass. The light that filtered in was pale but steady, a thin gold that turned the dew on the wheat stalks into tiny mirrors. Mara inhaled, letting the scent of damp earth and distant woodsmoke fill her lungs. It was the smell of a day that could be counted on, the kind that made her ledger feel less like a frantic scramble and more like a quiet tally.

Across the courtyard, Old Joren was already coaxing the embers of the communal hearth back to life, his breath fogging in the cold air. He muttered a half-remembered rhyme about "the sun's steady hand," a phrase that had once been a joke among the elders but now sounded like a prayer. Mara smiled, thinking how quickly humor turned to habit when the world tightened its grip.

The children were already stirring in the loft above the barn, their bare feet pattering on the wooden planks as they chased each other toward the water barrel. Lira, the youngest, halted mid-splash and pointed a stubby finger at the horizon. "Look," she whispered, "the sky's blushing." Mara followed her gaze and saw a faint pink blush spreading behind the ridge, a color that usually announced a proper dawn.

She turned back to her ledger, the leather-bound book resting on the rough-hewn table where she kept track of seed yields, grain stores, and the occasional rumor that drifted in from the next valley. The first entry of the day was always a simple observation: time of first light, temperature, wind direction. She dipped her quill in the inkwell—made from soaked oak galls—and wrote, "05:12, 2°C, north-northwest breeze, clear." The numbers felt like anchors.

A sudden gust rattled the shutters, and for a heartbeat the light flickered, as if someone had tugged a curtain across the sun. Mara's hand paused, ink poised above the page. The flicker passed, and the light steadied again, but the unease lingered like a half-remembered dream. She glanced at the sky; the pink had deepened, but the sun itself remained hidden behind a thin veil of cloud that seemed too thick for this hour.

She heard the creak of the barn door as Sefa slipped inside, her arms bundled with woven reeds and a satchel of dried herbs. Sefa's eyes, sharp and always scanning, flicked to Mara's ledger. "You're up early," she said, voice low enough not to wake the sleeping infants. "The birds are quiet again." Mara nodded, noting the absence of the usual chorus of sparrows and finches that usually greeted the dawn.

Sefa settled on the bench opposite, pulling a small, smooth stone from her satchel. She turned it over in her palm, feeling the faint ridges worn by river water. "This," she said, "is what I'll use for the next telling. A stone that remembers the river's flow, even when the river runs low." Mara smiled, appreciating the metaphor even as she worried about the river's actual flow, which had been sluggish since the first hesitations in the sun's pattern.

The two women fell into a comfortable silence, broken only by the occasional clink of the hearth's pot and the distant lowing of cattle being led to pasture. Mara felt the weight of her ledger shift from a mere record to something more intimate—a chronicle of how the community was learning to read the sun's moods. Each entry was a tiny act of resistance against the creeping uncertainty that clung to the edges of their world.

By the time the sun finally broke through the cloud cover, spilling a sharper, brighter gold across the fields, the mist had lifted enough to reveal the dew-glittered wheat swaying in a gentle breeze. Mara stood, stretching her back, and watched as the light caught the edges of the sickles leaned against the barn wall, turning them into brief, flashing signals.

She turned to Sefa, who was already rising, her reeds tucked under one arm. "Seems like today might hold," Mara said, trying to keep the tremor of hope out of her voice. Sefa's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Or maybe it's just a trick the light plays before it decides to hide again." She chuckled, a soft sound that seemed to blend with the rustle of the stalks.

Mara laughed despite herself, the sound surprising her. It had been weeks since she'd allowed herself a genuine laugh, the kind that came from the belly rather than the throat. She felt the tension in her shoulders ease, if only a fraction. "We'll mark it," she said, tapping the ledger. "First reliable dawn in... I don't even know how many weeks."

Sefa nodded, her gaze drifting to the horizon where the sun now sat, a firm disc edged with a soft halo. "We'll need more than marks," she murmured. "We'll need stories that hold the light when it's thin." Mara thought of the ledger's margins, where she sometimes sketched quick drawings of clouds or wrote down snippets of overheard conversation. Those marginalia were becoming as important as the main entries.

The two women walked together toward the fields, their boots sinking slightly into the

damp soil. As they passed the first rows of wheat, Mara knelt to inspect a stalk, feeling the firmness of the grain head beneath her fingertips. The kernels were plump, a promising sign that the soil still held enough warmth to nurture growth, even if the sun's schedule was erratic.

A distant clang echoed from the smithy, where Tomas was hammering out a new set of hinges for the greenhouse panels. The sound was rhythmic, steady—a counterpoint to the irregular pulses of light above. Mara smiled, thinking how the community's labor was beginning to sync with the new cadence of day and night, each strike of the hammer a small act of recommitting to routine.

They reached the edge of the plot where a series of low stone walls framed a patch of earth turned over for planting tubers. Mara crouched, running her fingers through the loosened soil, feeling its coolness and the faint scent of rotting leaf litter from last autumn. She whispered a promise to the earth: that they would tend it, that they would learn its rhythms, that they would not let the fading light steal their resolve.

Sefa stood nearby, watching a group of children huddle around a shallow pit where they'd placed a glass jar filled with water and a few seeds. The jar was intended to capture the morning's weak light and concentrate it onto the seeds, a rudimentary greenhouse of their own making. The children's faces were intent, their breaths forming tiny clouds in the cold air.

Mara felt a surge of pride, tempered by the knowledge that such ingenuity was born of necessity. She glanced back at the ledger tucked under her arm, the leather warm from her body heat. The day's first entry was already forming in her mind: a note about the quality of light, the temperature of the soil, the laughter of children experimenting with light traps.

As the sun climbed higher, its light became more direct, casting sharper shadows that stretched across the field like thin, dark fingers. Mara watched the shadows dance, each movement a reminder that the sun, though fickle, still obeyed the laws of physics. She found comfort in that constancy, even as the timing remained unpredictable.

The morning's work settled into a rhythm: Mara checking the moisture levels in the seed beds, Sefa moving among the rows to gather herbs for the evening's stew, the children taking turns tending their light jars, and the elders sharing low-voiced stories of the old days when the sun rose like clockwork. Each activity was a thread in the fabric of their adapting society.

By mid-morning, a thin line of cloud began to gather on the western horizon, hinting at the possibility of another hesitation. Mara felt a familiar prickle at the base of her skull, the same sensation she'd felt when the first irregularities appeared months ago. She

paused, eyes narrowed, and watched the cloud's edge creep inward, its leading edge soft and indistinct.

She turned to Sefa, who was tying a bundle of thyme with a strip of cloth. "Do you think it'll hold?" she asked, keeping her voice steady. Sefa looked up, her expression thoughtful. "The sun's been playing hide-and-seek for a while now. We've learned to read its tells, but it still likes to surprise us." She gave a small, wry smile. "We'll just have to keep our lanterns trimmed and our stories ready."

Mara nodded, returning her attention to the field. She pulled a small, carved wooden token from her pocket—a talisman she'd made from a piece of salvaged oak, etched with the symbol of a rising sun. She slipped it into the soil beside a young wheat shoot, a quiet gesture of hope tucked into the earth.

The cloud continued its slow advance, diffusing the light into a softer, more even glow. Shadows softened, and the field took on a luminous quality, as if the entire landscape were bathed in a gentle, diffuse glow. Mara felt a strange peace settle over her; the light, though less intense, was still present, still nurturing.

She resumed her work, the rhythm of her movements syncing with the muted pulse of the day. The wheat swayed, the children laughed, the hearth smoked gently in the distance, and the ledger rested against her thigh, waiting for the next entry. In that moment, the world felt both fragile and resilient, a testament to the ingenuity that blossoms when the familiar rhythms of light are disrupted.

As the sun began its inevitable descent, the light shifted again, taking on a honeyed hue that lingered longer than usual. Mara watched the sky change, noting how the colors deepened and softened, a reminder that even an irregular sun could still paint the world with beauty.

She gathered her tools, tucked the ledger safely under her arm, and headed back toward the village, her steps echoing on the packed earth path. Behind her, the field lay quiet, the wheat standing tall, the children's light jars catching the fading glow like tiny captured stars.

Mara pushed open the heavy door of the communal hall, where a fire crackled in the central pit and the scent of simmering stew drifted from the cauldron. Faces turned toward her, eyes bright with the shared understanding that another day had been met, another observation recorded, another small victory logged against the creeping uncertainty.

She took her place beside Sefa, who was already ladling stew into wooden bowls. The steam rose, carrying with it the promise of warmth and sustenance. Mara opened her ledger to a fresh page, dipped her quill, and began to write, not just the facts of the

day, but the quiet certainty that, even under an irregular sun, humanity could still find a way to measure, to hope, and to endure.

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