Aftermarket Prosthetics

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Aftermarket Prosthetics takes place in the uneasy quiet that follows an impossible catastrophe. The outbreak has ebbed, but its damage remains written on the skyline and in the bodies that move through it—streets barricaded by welded rebar, supply chains knotted like scar tissue, and survivors who have lost more than anyone knows how to count. The institutions that promised salvation learned how quickly a promise can fracture under pressure. What rose in the cracks are workshops built from shipping containers, markets that open at dusk and close before dawn, and an economy of need that measures value in grip strength, gait stability, and the will to try again tomorrow.

At the heart of this novel is an engineer who does not wait for permission to mend what’s broken. In a city where clinics ration and insurers triage by spreadsheet, they scavenge motors from delivery drones, bearings from elevator guts, and housings from the bones of machines left to rust. Their designs are not textbook clean. They hum when they should whisper, and they carry the fingerprints of a hundred previous lives, but they work—often when nothing else does. Around that ringing workbench gathers a constellation of people who have been told to accept less: a courier who needs to outrun the dead zones, a medic with hands that remember too much, a child who measures days in millimeters of new balance.

The book is a thriller because survival here is not guaranteed by ingenuity alone. When limbs become commodities, so do the bodies that wear them. Black-market surgeons set up theaters beneath floodlights, and there are back rooms where augmented strength can be priced down to the screw. Every fix has a bill, every promise an escape clause, and every door a watcher who decides who passes through. The protagonist learns that building a better joint means wading into joints of a different kind: the uneasy hinge between law and necessity, the pivot between consent and coercion, and the fulcrum where desperation can pry open anyone’s resolve.

But Aftermarket Prosthetics is also a story about identity under pressure. A prosthetic is never just a tool; it is a language the body learns to speak. It can restore what was lost, redefine what was possible, or become a reminder that the world can be remade even when it refuses to heal neatly. The characters here argue across workbenches and clinic cots about the meaning of “whole”—who gets to claim it, who gets it denied, and who decides when a body is good enough. They grapple with phantom pain and phantom expectations, with the difference between being repaired and being rewritten, and with the fear that changing the self is a kind of surrender—or a kind of liberation.

In the ruins of the supply chain, access is the plot. The cold math of scarcity draws lines between those who can upgrade and those who must make do. Every chapter asks what happens when open-source schematics meet closed fists, when a public good becomes a private password, and when a city must choose whether ingenuity is a right or a privilege. The engineer’s workshop becomes a courtroom and a sanctuary, a place where bolts and bearings sit beside questions that cannot be tightened with a torque wrench.

Though the pages race with break-ins, back-alley surgeries, and flights through quarantine zones, this is not solely a story about running from monsters. The dead are dangerous; the living, with their contracts and justifications, are more so. The most terrifying choices happen under bright lights, with everyone awake and signing. Here, suspense lives not only in the chase but in the pause before a cut, in the moment someone looks at a blueprint and decides whether to follow it or to make a new line.

You will meet people who refuse to be flattened into symbols—survivors who are activists and artists, thieves who are caretakers, doctors who are both healers and dealers. Their debates are as consequential as their heists. They will ask each other, and you, what a human body is for: to be preserved, to be optimized, to be chosen every day despite the cost. They will break things that needed breaking and save things that never thought they could be saved.

This introduction is an invitation into a city of spare parts and second chances, where courage is measured in footfalls and the willingness to thread a needle in the dark. Come watch a hand built from scrap lift a cup of water without spilling. Come stand in a doorway as a knee that learned balance yesterday takes a first step toward tomorrow. Come listen to the arguments of those who have lost much and want more than survival. In these pages, the question is not whether bodies can be remade—it is who gets to decide what they become.

CHAPTER ONE: The Quiet After the Sirens

The sirens had stopped three months ago, give or take a week. Maren knew this because they had marked it on the wall behind their workbench, a single vertical line in grease pencil beside a crooked number thirty-one. Thirty-one days since the last official all-clear, twenty-two since the last unofficial one, and nine since anyone with authority had bothered to say anything official about anything at all. The city's government, such as it was, now operated out of the basement of a library three kilometers east of the river, which was better than the parking garage they had used before the flooding.

Maren woke the way most people in Sector 7 did: cold, on a cot that had no right to still be a cot given what it had survived, and with the particular taste of recycled air in the back of the throat. The ventilation shaft in the apartment rattled at odd hours, sounding less like breathing infrastructure and more like something trying to get in. They had stuffed rags around the grille and it helped, in the way that most lies help — just enough to make the difference between sleeping and not.

The apartment sat on the fourth floor of a building that had once been residential and now served as a de facto tenement for forty-three people across seven units. The elevator worked twice a week if you whispered the right prayer to the building manager, a woman named Gladys who had survived two outbreaks and a fire and had the paperwork to prove she owned absolutely nothing she presided over. Maren took the stairs. It was better for the leg.

Not the prosthetic leg — the other one. The right one, the flesh-and-blood one that still carried the dull ache of an old infection that antibiotics had grown tired of defeating. Maren's left leg, from six inches below the knee down, was a thing of contradictions: titanium alloy struts scavenged from a transit rail car, a hydraulic ankle joint rated for cargo drones, and a socket they had molded themselves using a plastic bag, a vacuum cleaner, and what they would later describe to a horrified pre-outbreak orthopedic surgeon as "a reasonable amount of guesswork."

It worked. That was the thing people had trouble accepting. It clanked, yes. It whined when the hydraulic fluid thinned in cold weather. It left scuff marks on tile floors that Maren had long since stopped apologizing for. But it worked. Every morning, every staircase, every uneven sidewalk plate and buckled intersection between the apartment and the workshop two kilometers north, it carried them forward with a reliability that felt, some days, more honest than anything else in the city.

Breakfast was two protein blocks and filtered water that tasted faintly of iodine. Maren

ate standing at the counter, staring out the window at the street below, where a man was leading a cart made from a shopping cart and bicycle wheels through a checkpoint manned by volunteers in body armor who looked too young to have ever known a world that ran on paperwork instead of barter. The man in the cart was selling what appeared to be a small generator, or possibly a microwave with ambitions. It was hard to tell anymore.

The day's first client arrived at seven forty-five, which was late by pre-outbreak standards and early by current ones. Maren heard the knock — three quick, one slow, the sector standard for "someone recognizable, not a threat" — and opened the door to find a woman standing in the hallway with her left arm pinned to her ribs and her face doing something that suggested the pain was personal.

"You're the one," the woman said. It was not a question.

Maren recognized her. They had seen her twice before, both times from a distance: once huddled in the doorway of a pharmacy that had been converted into a shelter, and once limping through the evening market near the old rail yard with a gait that suggested her right leg was either broken or being taught a new language. Her name, according to the network of whispers that served as the sector's information infrastructure, was Yael. She was a courier. She ran packages between sectors, sometimes for the library government, sometimes for people who preferred not to be identified, and occasionally for no one at all, which was when she charged the most.

"You're hurt," Maren said.

"You're observant." Yael shifted her weight. Her right knee buckled slightly, compensated, held. "I need a new left arm. Not a cosmetic one. Not something that looks nice in a portrait. I need grip. I need rotation. I need to be able to hang from a rope for ninety seconds without it deciding it has opinions about the arrangement."

Maren stepped back and held the door open. "Come in. Let me see what's left of it."

The apartment's main room served as a reception area, a consultation room, and a place to eat meals that Maren sometimes remembered to eat. A folding table stood against one wall, covered in a surface protector that had long since stopped protecting anything. A chair. A shelf of reference books — anatomy texts, mechanical engineering manuals, a dog-eared copy of a field guide to electrical components that someone had highlighted in four different colors. Against the opposite wall, a door led to the bedroom and, through a second door that required stepping sideways, to the workshop.

Yael sat at the table and extended her left arm across the surface with the practiced calm of someone who had learned that flinching made other people flinch. The arm

ended just below the elbow. The stump was wrapped in gauze that had been changed recently — clean, at least — and beneath it Maren could see the faint ridges of swelling that spoke of a healing that was happening on the body's terms, not the patient's.

"How long ago?" Maren asked, pulling on a pair of gloves produced from a box marked with a symbol that no longer meant anything.

"Eight days. Debris collapse during a run through the east corridor. Reinforcement beam. Very dramatic, very impersonal." Yael flexed her right hand. "My buddy pulled me out. She didn't make it. Lost the other arm and a lung. She's in Ward 11 if you want to send flowers, which I'm told are available in Sector 9 for a reasonable markup."

Maren did not offer condolences. They had found early on that the people who came to them did not want sympathy. They wanted options. Sympathy was a luxury measured in seconds that neither party could afford.

"What have you been using it for?" Maren asked, examining the stump with the careful, impersonal attention of someone assessing raw material.

"A hook. Cable and a carabiner. Works for carrying things. Does not work for climbing, gripping, steering, typing, holding a cup of coffee, or any of the other thousand small things a hand is supposed to do. I'm a courier, not a porter. I need function."

Maren nodded slowly. They liked that word. Function. It was honest in a way that most of what passed for conversation in the sector was not. People came to them wanting "normal" or "better" or "like before," words that floated without weight. Function was a word you could build around. Function had dimensions.

"I can make you something," Maren said. "But I have to be honest with you about what 'something' looks like right now."

Yael raised an eyebrow. "How honest are we talking?"

"I'm going to tell you exactly what I have, what I can do, what it will cost you in parts and labor and follow-up adjustments, and then you're going to decide if it's worth it. No surprises. No false promises. And if I can't make it work for you, I'll tell you that too."

It was a speech Maren had given before. It was also, they knew, the reason people came back. The sector was full of promises. Every clinic, every back-room surgeon, every market stall vendor with a convincing smile and a box of mismatched components had a promise. Maren's promise was simply this: the truth about what

they could build, delivered by someone who understood the math of leverage, the physics of load-bearing joints, and the stubborn mechanics of human bone and muscle that refused to stop trying to move even when the rest of the world gave up on them.

"I'm listening," Yael said.

Maren turned to the shelf and pulled down a battered notebook — actual paper, not a screen, because screens broke and paper, if kept dry, lasted. They flipped to a page near the back, where a rough sketch showed a forearm assembly of their own design. The drawing was meticulous: a forearm housing made from a section of aluminum pipe, two cable-driven fingers actuated by a simple ratchet mechanism, a wrist joint borrowed from the steering assembly of a delivery bot, and a mounting socket that could be fitted over a transradial amputation using a combination of silicone liner and adjustable clamps.

"This is version three," Maren said, tapping the sketch. "First version had too much play in the wrist. Second version had fingers that closed too aggressively — nearly took a thumb off during testing. Third version is tighter, more responsive, and I've reinforced the cable routing so it doesn't bind under lateral load."

"Testing," Yael repeated. "On what, precisely?"

"On me." Maren held up their left arm — the prosthetic, the assemblage, the thing that was neither machine nor limb but something stubbornly in between. "I test everything first. It's the only way to know if something works before you stake your daily existence on it."

Yael looked at the arm. It was not pretty. The aluminum was scratched and dull where powder coating had been scoured away, and the joints were visible, along with the bolts that held them in place like small, purposeful knots in a mechanical tendon. A patch of heat-shrink tubing marked a repair that had already been made and would likely need to be made again.

"It's ugly," Yael said.

"It's honest," Maren replied. "Do you want pretty, or do you want to be able to climb a fire escape in the rain?"

"The fire escape wins."

Maren smiled without showing teeth. It was their version of a contract. "Come back tomorrow morning. I need to take a cast of your residual limb and measure your intact arm for grip dimensions, range of motion, the geometry of your wrist. I'll have something ready by Thursday."

"I need it by Wednesday."

"Then we're going to have a problem, because silicone liners don't cure faster when you shout at them." Maren paused. "I can have a temporary fitting by tomorrow evening — a simplified version, no fine motor capability, but enough to grip and support your body weight. You can run on it until Wednesday, when I'll have the full assembly ready."

"Done." Yael stood, tucked the useless arm against her chest, and headed for the door. At the threshold, she stopped. "How much?"

Maren thought for a moment, running a quick tally in their head: aluminum stock, cable, the servo motor from a drone motor they had been saving, the silicone liner material, the time. It was, as always, the hardest calculation — not the mechanical one, but the one that tried to assign a number to the gap between what someone had and what they needed.

"Two hundred credits for the build. Fifty for follow-up adjustments, which you will need. No upfront payment. You pay when it works."

"Cash?"

"Anything with value. Goods, services, information about where to find replacement parts for the cargo drone I've been waiting three weeks to repair." Maren met her eyes. "If you hear anything about a batch of harmonic drives sitting in a warehouse near the river docks, I will pay you back in full."

Yael nodded, and something passed between them — not warmth exactly, but recognition. The understanding that they were both people who had survived by being useful, and that usefulness was its own form of currency in a world that had forgotten how to print money and remembered, too late, how to hoard other things.

The door closed. Maren stood in the quiet apartment and listened to the radiator tick and the distant sound of a market opening, the murmur of voices wheeling and trading in the language of loss and necessity. Somewhere across the city, a siren wailed — not the old ones, the emergency ones, but a newer kind, a curfew klaxon that the sector government had installed last month to keep people indoors after dark. It was a sound that meant nothing good, and it meant nothing personal, which somehow made it worse.

Maren walked to the workshop, stepping through the narrow doorway and into the space that was, in every practical sense, their life. The room was roughly four meters by three, carved out of what had once been a storage closet in the building's

basement. Shelving lined three walls, stocked with categorized salvage: bins of fasteners sorted by diameter, drawers of wiring labeled in a shorthand that made sense only to Maren, a rack of metal stock in various alloys that they had accumulated through months of trading, scavenging, and the occasional act of negotiation that sat squarely on the ethical line and occasionally waved to the other side.

In the center of the room stood the workbench — a slab of welded steel that had once been a door, now covered in tools, half-finished projects, and the particular archaeology of ongoing work: a torque wrench beside a soldering iron beside a coffee tin full of ball bearings beside a sketch of a knee joint that looked like it had been drawn during a conversation, which it had. Maren had been talking to themselves at the time, which was also not unusual.

They set their bag down and pulled out the materials they had set aside the night before. A length of aluminum tubing, still wrapped in the paper from the supplier — not a store, a person, a retired plumber in Sector 4 who had kept a stash of building materials from before the outbreak and doled them out with the careful precision of someone who understood that surplus was temporary. Maren respected that. Respecting one's suppliers was, in this economy, a survival strategy.

Work on Yael's temporary fitting began at nine. It was unglamorous, detail-oriented labor: cutting the aluminum to length on a portable bandsaw that had been rebuilt twice, filing the edges smooth, drilling holes for cable routing with a hand drill whose battery held charge for approximately forty minutes and could not be replaced because the manufacturer no longer existed. Maren had tried three other brands before settling on this one, which they had found in a flooded electronics store and nursed back to functionality with scavenged cells.

By noon, the forearm housing was roughed out. The wrist joint, harvested from the delivery bot servo, was cleaned and its internal gears inspected under a magnifying loupe. The gears were worn but functional, their teeth slightly rounded from months of autonomous operation carrying packages through a city that had briefly, briefly, believed in the inevitability of automation. Maren set them aside and turned their attention to the finger mechanism.

Two fingers and a thumb. That was the minimum for functional grip — an opposable arrangement that could hold a rope, a handle, a weapon if it came to that, which in this city it did. Maren had experimented with three-fingered designs and even a four-finger model, but simplicity won every time, not because it was elegant but because it was maintainable. In a world without factories, without guaranteed supply chains, without the reassuring hum of a 3D printer that could be fed by a stockroom that no longer existed, simplicity was not aesthetic preference. It was survival.

The fingers were cut from sheet metal, drilled for pivot pins, and connected to the

cable system with crimped loops of steel wire. Maren bent the metal by hand using a vice and a length of pipe for leverage — no brake press, no CNC, just force and geometry and the hard-won intuition that came from months of building things that other people's lives depended on.

By four in the afternoon, the temporary arm was assembled. It was rough. The finish was abysmal. The cable tension was imperfect, and Maren suspected the finger alignment was off by a degree or two, which would cause the grip to drift leftward under load. But it moved. It gripped. When Maren hung a five-kilogram weight from the hook mechanism, it held firm.

They would have to be honest with Yael about the drift. Honesty was the price of trust, and trust was the thing that kept people coming back to a workshop run by a self-taught engineer in a basement instead of a licensed clinic with proper equipment and proper credentials. Maren had no credentials. They had a workshop, a set of skills, and the hard-won knowledge that the body did not care about where its parts came from, only whether they worked.

The afternoon light coming through the basement window was the color of weak tea, filtered through concrete and glass and the particular grime of a city that had not yet committed to rebuilding. Maren sat on the workbench and ate a protein block in silence, staring at the temporary arm mounted on the test rig — a simple clamp attached to the bench edge, holding the device at the angle of a resting forearm.

It looked like a promise. Unfinished, imperfect, but a promise all the same.

Somewhere outside, the curfew siren began its long, descending wail. Maren finished the protein block, set down the wrapper, and began cleaning the workspace. Tomorrow, there would be a cast to make. Thursday, a fitting. And beyond Thursday, the question that was always waiting, the one that every survivor carried like a stone in the pocket: what happens when the fix is not enough, and the broken thing you are trying to rebuild is yourself.

That was a question Maren had learned not to answer too quickly. The body had a way of surprising people. So did the city. And in the quiet after the sirens, the most important thing was not to have all the answers. It was to be standing at the workbench when the questions arrived.

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