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# Under the Crimson Sky

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## Introduction

The world is silent beneath the crimson sky. Every day, a hazed red veils the sun, painting ruined skyscrapers and withered fields in bloodlight. The air is thick with the memory of what humanity lost—endless forests, clean rivers, clear blue horizons. Survivors huddle in the ragged remnants of once-great cities, clinging to resources strictly measured and dispensed by a regime as suffocating as the clouds overhead. This is the age of the Directorate, where truth is rationed, whispers are dangerous, and hope is as rare as rain.

The Directorate's rule is absolute: they dole out water, food, and even information according to rigid algorithms. Surveillance drones flit like metal insects, recording every movement. Propaganda seeps from every screen, promising security, stoking fear. Outside the government-controlled city cores, the land is lawless and poisoned, patrolled by rogue enforcers and haunted by mutated shadows. Few dare cross beyond the sanctioned borders—the punishment for disobedience is public and severe.

Within these crumbling walls, the paths of two solitary souls edge toward collision. Lira, a notorious smuggler with more enemies than friends and secrets carved deep into her bones, trades in contraband hope: forbidden books, seeds, rumors of green places. She has survived through wit and cunning, forever skirting the Directorate's gaze. But when an act of sabotage she didn't commit is pinned on her, Lira's already tenuous life fractures; she becomes prey in a city that never forgets.

Chasing her is Erik, a loyal engineer raised to believe in the regime's justice. He once built machines to keep the city breathing, patching up infrastructure no one else cared to save. But as rumors drift through the ranks—stories of disappearances, evidence tampered with, odd silences in the nightly broadcast—Erik's convictions waver. Now, ordered to hunt Lira, he faces his first true test: protect the law, or heed his troubling doubts and risk everything.

Their stories, at first so distant, are bound by necessity and by the spirit of a world refusing to die quietly. Together they will traverse hostile wilderness and gutted ruins. They will face betrayal, reckoning, and the fragile, ferocious glimmer of rebellion. As the skies burn crimson above, Lira and Erik's choices will ripple through the fate of their broken world—sparking a struggle for survival, for truth, and for a hope that dares to defy the dying light.

In the shadow of a crimson sky, the first spark of change is struck.

## CHAPTER ONE: Accused Under Crimson Skies

The crimson light, a perpetual shroud over the sprawling skeletal remains of what was once the city of Veridia, did little to soften the harsh angles of the Directorate's enforcer vehicles. Their black shells, devoid of any reflective sheen, absorbed the muted red, making them seem like predatory shadows gliding through the debris-strewn streets. Lira watched one such patrol crawl past her hidden perch, a crumbling observation deck of a forgotten office tower, the wind whistling through the broken panes like a mournful sigh. Below, the regulated bustle of District 7 was a stark contrast to the quiet decay of the outer sectors. Here, life pulsed, albeit under the ever-present hum of surveillance drones.

She tightened her grip on the worn leather strap of her satchel, its contents a carefully curated collection of illicit necessities: a micro-comm unit, a handful of dried nutrient bars, and a dog-eared copy of "The Last Green," a pre-Collapse novel about a world Lira could only imagine. The book was her most valuable commodity, not for trade, but for the flickering ember of hope it kept alive within her. Today, however, hope felt like a distant, cruel joke.

Her contact, a twitchy, perpetually nervous man named Jax, was already late. Lira scanned the grimy street below, a knot tightening in her stomach. Jax was usually punctual, almost obsessively so. His tardiness now, especially after their last hushed conversation about a particularly dangerous delivery, prickled at her sense of unease. She was meeting him to exchange a cache of salvaged medical supplies for information about a rumored safe passage through the Southern Barrens, a treacherous stretch of irradiated wasteland. The Directorate's recent crackdown on independent trade routes made such information invaluable.

A sudden flicker of red light, not from the sky, but from a Directorate enforcement drone directly below her, caused Lira to duck instinctively. The drone, larger and more agile than the standard surveillance models, had its optical sensor fixed on something near the abandoned market stalls where Jax was supposed to be. A chill, colder than the wind whipping through the broken glass, snaked up her spine. This wasn't a routine patrol. This was a hunt.

She pressed herself against the grimy concrete, her heart hammering against her ribs. From her vantage point, she saw the drone descend, its whirring blades kicking up dust. Then, a figure emerged from the shadows of an archway. Jax. Her relief was immediate, then quickly overshadowed by a surge of alarm. He wasn't alone. Two Directorate enforcers, their armored forms menacing even from a distance, flanked him. Jax's head was bowed, his shoulders slumped in a posture of defeat.

The enforcers were speaking to him, their voices muffled by the wind, but Lira didn't need to hear the words. The rigid stance of the enforcers, the way one of them roughly shoved Jax forward, confirmed her worst fears. They had him. And if they had him, it was only a matter of time before they had her. Jax knew too much, knew her usual routes, her safe houses, the subtle hand signals she used to indicate a clear drop.

A shiver ran down her spine, not of cold, but of raw, primal fear. This wasn't just about a missed exchange or a confiscated delivery. The enforcers' presence, the specific drone, and the look of utter resignation on Jax's face spoke of something far more serious. She had always operated on the fringes, beneath the Directorate's radar, a ghost in the system. But it seemed her luck had finally run out.

She watched as the enforcers pushed Jax into the back of their vehicle, a dark, armored transport that looked like a scar on the cityscape. The drone ascended, its red eye scanning the surrounding structures. Lira held her breath, willing herself to be invisible, to meld with the crumbling concrete. She knew the Directorate's tactics. They wouldn't just take Jax. They would interrogate him, break him, and then use him to bait a trap for her.

Her mind raced, sifting through possibilities, discarding dead ends. She couldn't go back to her usual bolt-holes. They would be compromised. Her network, carefully built over years, was now a liability. She was exposed, alone, and on the run. The crimson sky seemed to press down on her, an oppressive weight.

Suddenly, a voice, amplified and distorted, boomed from the Directorate vehicle, echoing through the desolate sector. "Lira Vance! You are accused of sabotage against the Directorate's public works infrastructure. Surrender immediately, or face extreme prejudice."

The accusation hit her like a physical blow. Sabotage? Her? Lira specialized in discreet smuggling, in trading information and rare commodities, not in blowing up power conduits or disrupting comms towers. The charge was absurd, outrageous. But in the Directorate's world, an accusation was as good as a conviction. And the penalty for such a crime was... terminal.

Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but years of street-level survival had forged a core of resilience within Lira. She took a deep, shaky breath, pushing down the surge of adrenaline. This wasn't a mistake; it was a frame. Someone had deliberately set her up, twisted the fragile threads of her illicit life into a noose. But who? And why?

The enforcer vehicle, having disgorged its amplified warning, began to sweep slowly down the street, its headlamps cutting through the gloom, searching. The drone above dipped lower, its hum growing louder. They knew she was here. Jax must have cracked

under pressure, or perhaps they had extracted information from him before he even had a chance to resist.

Lira knew she had precious little time. Staying put meant capture, interrogation, and a public execution to serve as a deterrent to others. Fleeing meant stepping into the vast, unknown dangers of the forbidden wilderness, a landscape rumored to be teeming with horrors, both natural and man-made. But the choice, stark and terrifying, was no choice at all.

Her eyes darted to the nearest fire escape, a rickety ladder of rust and hope clinging to the side of the decaying building. It led upwards, towards the desolate rooftops, towards the edge of the known city, and beyond. Taking one last look at the approaching enforcer vehicle, its red lights painting the dust-filled air, Lira made her decision. She would run. She would vanish. And somehow, she would clear her name, or die trying.

With a final, defiant glance at the crimson sky that now felt like a curse, Lira launched herself towards the fire escape, her hands finding the cold, rusted metal. The first rung creaked ominously under her weight, a loud protest in the oppressive silence. She didn't look back, only up, towards the bleak horizon, knowing that with every step, she was venturing deeper into a wilderness far more dangerous than anything she had ever encountered within the city walls. Her old life was over. Her new life, if she was lucky enough to have one, was about to begin, an outlaw under a sky that bled red.

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