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Beneath the Ashen Sky

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Introduction

Beyond the shattered rooftops of New Munich, the sky is a permanent swirl of gray—the color of ash and memory. The air tastes of metal and hopelessness, thick with the ghosts of the world that was. Every dawn is uncertain, filtered through surveillance lights and choking dust. Mara Keller, seventeen and weary beyond her years, measures time by government curfews and the dull click of ration counters. Hope is a currency that few have any longer, and dreams are dangerous—almost as much as questions.

Life here is a series of tight, desperate routines. Mara's family, once full and vibrant, is now a fragile trio: a silent father, a careful mother, and a younger brother named Luka who still tries to laugh. Each day, Mara risks her footsteps through the crowded lanes of their compound, eyes to the pavement, heart thundering every time a drone passes low with its unblinking lens. The city's walls are more than concrete—they are a cage, reinforced by years of lies and fear. Open defiance is a whispered legend, told alongside stories of distant rebellions crushed before they could grow.

Everything changes the night Luka disappears. Mara wakes to find his bed cold, his few belongings gone, and the city alive with rumors: her brother has been accused of stirring trouble, of consorting with the underground resistance sleepers. In the harrowing hours that follow, her family slips further into silence and suspicion. Mara scrambles for answers, but every shadow hides a threat, and in New Munich, truth is a rare and precious thing.

There is little time to grieve, let alone plan. The regime moves swiftly, sweeping through districts with waves of intimidating force. Neighbors vanish, doors are marked, and Mara's home becomes a prison of uncertainty. Yet amid her fear, something else stirs—defiance, stubborn as a weed pushing through cracks in the street. A cryptic note, hurriedly shoved under her door, hints that Luka might still be alive, secreted away by those brave—or desperate—enough to fight back.

Mara's journey, forged in desperation, becomes something more: a search for Luka, yes, but also for answers, for freedom, for hope. The path draws her first into the maze of the underground—where allies and enemies are rarely what they seem—and later, into the very heart of a rebellion poised on the edge of collapse. Each choice she makes carries a price, and the line between right and wrong grows ever more blurred in the city's shifting shadows.

It is said that beneath the ruins, beneath the ashen sky, something new might still grow. Mara doesn't know if she believes it. But with every risk, every scar, she carves

her will into the stone of this battered city. Her story—the story of loss, resilience, and an uprising born of both—begins here.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Quarantine Bell

The first clang of the Quarantine Bell was not a surprise, not anymore. It was a familiar, dull thud that vibrated through the cracked pavement of New Munich, rattling the windows of Mara's cramped apartment. It wasn't just a sound; it was a physical sensation, a tightening in the chest, a reminder that the world outside their district, outside their city, no longer existed for them. It was 0600 hours, standard time, and another day of sanctioned existence had begun.

Mara rolled onto her side, the threadbare blanket doing little to ward off the morning chill that perpetually seeped through the building's deteriorating walls. Her brother, Luka, usually bounced out of bed at the first sign of dawn, an unshakeable optimism clinging to him like a stubborn burr. But today, his bunk, a rickety contraption above hers, was empty. The blankets were tossed back in a familiar tangle, a sign of his hurried departure. No note. No whisper. Just absence.

Her stomach, already a hollow cavern from the previous day's meager ration, clenched tighter. Luka rarely left without a word, especially not before their designated breakfast time, when they would share a single nutrient paste packet and pretend it was something more substantial. Their parents were already up, the low murmur of their voices a familiar soundtrack to Mara's waking hours. Her father, Jakob, would be meticulously cleaning his worn-out tools, a habit that bordered on ritualistic. Her mother, Elara, would be rationing their water supply, her movements precise and economical.

Mara swung her legs over the side of her bunk, the cold floor biting at her bare feet. The air in their small living space was stale, recycled through the building's ancient filtration system, perpetually smelling of dust and something metallic. She dressed quickly, pulling on her patched tunic and trousers, the same utilitarian clothes she wore every day. Fashion was a forgotten concept; survival was the only trend.

As she moved towards the kitchen alcove, a glint of metal caught her eye on Luka's desk. It was his small, chipped tin bird, a relic from their grandmother, passed down with a whispered promise of freedom that felt increasingly hollow. Next to it, half-hidden beneath a textbook on repurposed circuit boards, was a folded piece of paper. Not a note, not from Luka, but a scrawled symbol: three interlocking triangles. Mara didn't recognize it.

She picked it up, her fingers tracing the rough lines. It felt significant, heavy with unspoken meaning. Luka had always been fascinated by symbols, by hidden messages in plain sight. He'd spend hours doodling in the margins of his school comm-

slate, imagining other worlds, other ways of life. Mara had always dismissed it as childish fantasy, a dangerous indulgence in a world that demanded strict adherence to reality.

Her parents were indeed in the kitchen, their faces etched with the familiar weariness that defined their generation. Her father's hands, usually steady, fumbled with a wrench. Her mother's back was stiff as she poured the measured water into their shared mug. Neither looked up immediately, as if the silence of Luka's absence was a fragile thing, easily shattered.

"Luka's not here," Mara said, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet room.

Her mother flinched, her hand spilling a few precious drops of water. Her father stopped his movements, his head slowly turning. His eyes, usually a calm blue, were clouded with a familiar, unspoken fear.

"He left early," Elara said, her voice tight, a practiced calm that didn't quite mask the tremor in her hands. "Said he had extra duties at the Reclamation Center."

Mara frowned. Luka's "duties" were usually scavenging for usable parts in the city's endless waste zones. He never had "extra" duties, not without a prior notification from the Sector Authority, and they always had to be approved. And he never left before breakfast.

"He didn't say anything yesterday," Mara pressed, her gaze flicking between her parents. "Did he mention anything to you?"

Jakob cleared his throat. "He's been... preoccupied. Asking questions." His voice was low, laced with a warning Mara understood implicitly. Questions were dangerous. Questions led to attention. Attention led to disappearance.

A chill snaked up Mara's spine. Luka had been asking questions, yes. About the filters on the water recyclers, about the energy consumption of the surveillance drones, about the true purpose of the high walls that ringed New Munich. He had a brilliant, inquisitive mind, a thirst for knowledge that Mara had always admired, even as it terrified her. He called it 'understanding the system'; Mara called it 'painting a target on your back'.

"What kind of questions?" Mara asked, her voice barely a whisper. She held up the paper with the triangular symbol. "Did he leave this?"

Her mother's eyes widened, then quickly darted away. Her father's jaw tightened. "No, Mara. Put that down. It's... nothing."

"Nothing?" Mara scoffed. "Luka doesn't leave 'nothing' lying around. And he doesn't just disappear for extra duties without telling us."

The Quarantine Bell chimed again, a series of short, sharp blasts that signaled the start of mandatory work assignments. The sound was usually a cue for a hurried exit, but today, it seemed to deepen the oppressive silence in their apartment. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

"We'll find him, Mara," her mother said, her voice laced with a forced optimism that failed to reach her eyes. "He'll be back for dinner. He always is."

But Mara saw the way her mother's fingers trembled as she set down the mug. She saw the grim set of her father's shoulders. They were lying, or at least, withholding. Hiding something. And a cold dread settled in Mara's stomach, a premonition that this time, Luka wouldn't be back for dinner. This time, the silence was different. It was the silence of something taken, not merely absent.

Mara crumpled the paper with the symbol into her palm, a new determination hardening her resolve. She would find out what was happening. She had to. Luka was not just a brother; he was the last ember of light in their perpetually gray world. Without him, the ash would consume them all. And she refused to let that happen. The Quarantine Bell might mark the start of another day of oppression, but for Mara, it also marked the beginning of her search.

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