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# After the Fall

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## Introduction

Twenty years have passed since the sky lit up with the terrible brilliance of the Fall. The world that followed is jagged and raw—a landscape of broken towers and silent machines, where memories of electric light and humming cities linger in the ruins. Those who survived have scraped by with whatever they could scavenge or make anew, forging uneasy truces with the dangers lurking not only in the shadows but inside the hearts of desperate men and women. Trust is scarce. Mercy even scarcer. In this wild new order, the only law is survival.

I saw the world end. Or at least, I saw the moment everything I recognized as life blinked out, leaving us to pick through the ashes. My name is Harper Lane. I used to be an engineer—someone who made things work, someone who believed every problem had a solution. That belief has been battered but never entirely broken. I lost everything in the chaos: my home, my family, my sense of place and certainty. But loss can be its own kind of fuel. It can keep you moving when hope feels like foolishness.

The world after the Fall isn't devoid of beauty. Sometimes, the way the sunlight slants through shattered glass, or the wildflowers blooming in abandoned streets, reminds me how life lingers, stubborn and resilient. I have learned to find purpose in small things: in the rhythm of feet on broken concrete, in the warmth of a shared fire, even in the brief, flickering moments when trust emerges—rare as seedlings in dust.

But for most, kindness is a liability. The ashes are ruled by warlords and tyrants, by raiders who take whatever the strong can seize. Secret societies hoard scraps of forbidden knowledge, and rumors of oases—places where power flickers anew, where community and civilization might be reborn—whisper through the wastelands like half-remembered dreams. Some say hope is a resource more precious and more dangerous than any salvage. I've learned hope can lure you into traps as surely as hunger.

For years, I wandered, haunted by loss, driven by the bare need to survive. But all that changed when I crossed paths with a stranger who claimed to know of a hidden settlement—one where people were working to bring back the light, the order, the world we lost. Against reason, against caution, a stubborn spark flared inside me. Was it foolish to hope? Maybe. But it was also the only thing left to cling to.

This is my story, and the story of those who journeyed with me: the alliances we forged, the secrets we unearthed, the betrayals and the rebirths. In this age of ruins, survival is only the beginning. To dream of rebuilding, of forging something new from

the wreckage of the old, may be the most dangerous quest of all. But without dreams, what meaning does survival hold?

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## CHAPTER ONE: Ashes and Echoes

The wind was a constant companion in the wasteland, a mournful whisper through shattered windowpanes and the skeletal remains of what were once skyscrapers. It carried the scent of dust and decay, a familiar perfume of the forgotten world. Harper Lane moved through it like a ghost, her worn boots silent on the uneven pavement, a scavenged crowbar clutched loosely in her gloved hand. Twenty years had polished her into something hard and resilient, a survivor honed by necessity.

Today's hunt was for wires. Copper, specifically. Anything that could conduct even a faint current was worth its weight in scavenged food or a few precious rounds of ammunition. The old department store, its once-gleaming façade now pockmarked and grim, was a known haunt for scroungers and raiders alike. Harper preferred to work alone, the silence her only confidante, the rustle of loose metal her only warning.

The interior was a mausoleum of forgotten commerce. Mannequins, headless and armless, stood frozen in perpetual despair, draped in what remained of high-fashion fabrics—now just tattered rags. Sunlight speared through holes in the roof, illuminating motes of dust dancing in the air like lost spirits. Harper's eyes, keen and practiced, scanned every shadow, every overturned display. Danger wasn't always obvious; sometimes, it was a discarded food wrapper, a recently disturbed pile of rubble, a sign that someone else was near.

She found a promising section near what used to be the electronics department, or so the faded signage suggested. A tangled mass of cables, thick as her wrist, lay half-buried under a collapsed shelf. It was a jackpot. She knelt, her crowbar becoming a tool of precision as she pried away the debris, revealing more of the insulated treasure beneath. This could fetch her a week's worth of rations, maybe even a new pair of boots if she played her cards right with the traders at the Crossroads settlement.

A sudden, sharp *crack* echoed through the cavernous space. Harper froze, muscles tensing. It wasn't the wind. It was the sound of something heavy shifting, somewhere on the floor above her. She dropped the crowbar with a soft thud and drew the hunting knife from her belt, its blade glinting dully in the filtered light. Her breath hitched, shallow and silent. Every instinct screamed *danger*.

She pressed herself against a fallen pillar, blending into the shadows. Her ears strained, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. Another *creak*, closer this time, followed by the faint scrape of metal on concrete. Not raiders, she decided. Too quiet, too tentative. Raiders usually announced their presence with shouts and the clatter of heavy boots, looking to intimidate. This felt more like another lone scavenger, just as

wary and desperate as she was.

A figure appeared at the top of a shattered escalator, silhouetted against the weak light filtering in from a distant skylight. Tall, lanky, with a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over their face. Not a warlord's scout, certainly not one of the notorious "Iron Hounds" who prowled the ruined highways. The person carried a long, thin stick, almost like a walking staff, rather than a rifle. They moved slowly, cautiously, their gaze sweeping the floor below.

Harper held her breath. She could easily slip away, leave the copper for another day. But the thought of losing such a valuable find, especially after hours of searching, was a bitter pill. Her grip tightened on the knife. If they saw her, she'd have to act fast. Confrontation was always a last resort, but she wasn't afraid of it. Not anymore. The Fall had stripped away fear, leaving only a cold, sharp resolve.

The figure descended the escalator, each step deliberate, testing the ruined metal. As they drew closer, Harper could make out more details: a worn leather duster, patched and faded, and a small pack slung over one shoulder. They seemed unarmed, at least overtly. This made her more cautious, not less. An unarmed scavenger could still be a trap, a lure for something worse waiting in the wings.

Finally, the stranger reached the ground floor, their head turning slowly, systematically. Their hat shifted slightly, and Harper caught a glimpse of their profile. A sharp jawline, a faint scar near the eye. Male, probably. His movements were fluid, economical, betraying a practiced awareness of his surroundings. He wasn't just walking; he was observing, assessing, calculating. Just like her.

He passed within fifteen feet of her hiding spot, oblivious. Harper could feel the subtle shift in the air, the faint scent of woodsmoke and old leather that clung to him. He moved towards the back of the store, where the light was weakest, towards what she suspected were the loading docks. Probably looking for a way in or out, or another untapped stash of salvage.

Harper waited, counting to twenty, then thirty, after he disappeared from sight. Her instincts warred: retreat and wait for him to leave, or press on and claim her prize. The need for the copper won out. Survival demanded boldness, sometimes. She pushed away from the pillar, knife still in hand, and approached the tangled wires.

She'd only retrieved a small coil when a voice, surprisingly calm and level, cut through the quiet. "Lost something, did you?"

Harper spun, knife raised, her body already anticipating a fight. The stranger stood only a few yards away, having circled back silently. He held no weapon, his hands open and slightly raised in a gesture of non-aggression. His eyes, though, were sharp

and assessing, missing nothing. They were a startling shade of green, like moss on a shaded rock.

He looked younger than his movements suggested, perhaps late twenties, early thirties. There was a tiredness about him, but also a quiet confidence. His voice was smooth, unaccented, a rarity in these fragmented times. "Easy, friend," he said, taking a slow step back. "Just scouting. Didn't mean to startle you."

Harper didn't lower her knife. "You did more than startle me," she retorted, her voice a low growl. "You snuck up on me."

He offered a faint, almost imperceptible smile. "Habit. And it looks like you're not easily snuck up on, which is a good habit to have out here." His gaze flickered to the wires. "Looks like you hit a vein."

"It's mine," Harper stated, a warning in her tone.

"Didn't say it wasn't." He paused, his green eyes studying her. "You're good with that blade. Fast. What's your name?"

She hesitated. Names were often exchanged before violence, or before an uneasy truce. But giving hers felt like giving away a piece of herself. "Harper."

"Harper," he repeated, testing the name. "I'm Ethan." He lowered his hands, slowly, deliberately. "Look, Harper. I don't want any trouble. I'm just passing through. Just... scouting for something specific."

"What kind of specific?" Harper asked, her suspicion undimmed. Most scavengers were after anything with value. Specificity implied a purpose, perhaps even a plan. Plans were dangerous.

Ethan looked past her, towards the dilapidated back wall of the store. "Information. I heard rumors of something here. Something old. A server farm, maybe. Or a data center. Before the Fall, this city was... central to a lot of things."

Harper snorted. "You think you're going to find a working computer in this ruin? People have been picking this place clean for twenty years."

"People look for power cells, old tech they can sell for scrap, sure," Ethan conceded. "But few know what to look for, or how to identify the real prize. The kind of prize that could... restart things."

That last phrase snagged her attention. *Restart things*. It was a whisper in the wasteland, a desperate hope few dared to speak aloud. It was the kind of dangerous

hope that could get you killed. "Restart what?" she asked, her voice flat, trying to hide the flicker of interest his words had ignited.

Ethan's gaze met hers, and for the first time, she saw a profound earnestness in his green eyes. "Civilization. Light. The world we lost, Harper. Or at least, a piece of it." He took another slow step forward, carefully, gauging her reaction. "I know a place. A community. They're working on it. They're trying to put the pieces back together."

Harper's mind reeled. Rumors of hidden settlements, of pockets of true rebuilding, were plentiful. Most were just whispers, or elaborate hoaxes set by raiders to lure unsuspecting travelers. But the way he spoke, with such quiet conviction, made it different. It resonated with the buried engineer in her, the part that still believed in solutions, in progress.

"A place?" she repeated, skepticism warring with a potent, unfamiliar surge of... longing. "Where?"

"It's not close," Ethan said, shaking his head. "And it's not easy to get to. It's called Sanctuary. And they're looking for people. People with skills. People who remember how things used to work. Like you, Harper. An engineer, aren't you?"

Harper felt a cold shock. How could he know that? She hadn't breathed a word of her past to anyone in years. Her profession, her knowledge, was a carefully guarded secret, a liability in a world that valued brawn over brains. "How do you know that?" she demanded, her knife hand tightening.

Ethan gestured vaguely with his head towards the collapsed electronics section. "The way you were looking at those wires. Not just for scrap, for their potential. The way you moved, the precision in your movements when you were clearing that debris. It's in your eyes, Harper. The look of someone who sees the underlying structure, not just the surface chaos." He paused, a challenging glint in his eye. "Am I wrong?"

She didn't answer immediately. He wasn't wrong. He had seen past her hardened exterior, past the scavenger's grime, to the core of who she was. It was unsettling, but also, strangely, compelling. To be seen, truly seen, was a rare thing.

"Sanctuary isn't just about survival, Harper," Ethan continued, sensing her hesitation. "It's about rebuilding. There's power there. Real power. They're trying to restore a grid. They're working on... new ways to live. Safer ways. It's not a myth. I've been there."

The idea was audacious, almost unbelievable. A functioning grid? In this broken world? It was a dream so grand, so impossible, it made her heart ache with a longing she hadn't allowed herself to feel in years. But the risks... the journey, the unknown.

Betrayal lurked everywhere.

"Why are you out here, then?" she challenged, still holding her ground, still holding her knife. "If it's so great, why leave?"

Ethan's expression tightened, a shadow passing over his face. "To find people like you. People who can contribute. They sent me. They need specific skills. And they need those who aren't afraid to use them." He looked around the desolate store, then back at Harper. "This life, Harper. Is this all you want? Scavenging in the dark, always looking over your shoulder? Or do you want a chance to be part of something more? Something that matters?"

His words hung in the air, echoing the silent questions that had gnawed at her for years. Was this all there was? Just endless struggle, endless loss? Or was there truly a chance for something more? The whisper of hope, dangerous as it was, began to shout.

"It's a long journey," Ethan said, as if reading her mind. "And it won't be easy. There are dangers out there that make this place look like a picnic." He paused, his gaze steady, challenging her. "But if you're tired of the ashes, Harper, there's a path to the light."

Harper looked at the copper wires, then at Ethan, then back at the ruins of the department store, the grim reality of her existence. Survival was paramount, but what was she surviving *for*? The engineer in her, dormant for so long, stirred. The thought of wires carrying power, of lights flickering on, of machinery humming back to life, was a powerful lure. It was a chance to build again, to use the skills she'd buried under layers of hardened practicality.

She took a deep breath, the dust and decay filling her lungs. The world had ended once. Perhaps it was time to see if it could begin again. She still held her knife, but her arm had lowered, imperceptibly. "Tell me more about this Sanctuary," she said, her voice raspy, betraying a flicker of the hope she was trying to suppress. "And tell me why you think I should trust you."

Ethan's faint smile returned, a hint of triumph in his green eyes. "That, Harper, is a longer story. But it begins with a journey. And for trust, well, that's something we build on the road, isn't it?" He turned, motioning vaguely towards the setting sun, which cast long, dramatic shadows through the ruined cityscape. "The wasteland doesn't wait. We should move."

Harper hesitated for only a moment longer. The copper could wait. The future, however uncertain, beckoned. She sheathed her knife, the click echoing in the silent store. "Alright, Ethan," she said, her voice firm. "Lead the way. But if this is a trick,

you'll regret it."

He nodded, a knowing look on his face. "I expect nothing less, Harper. Nothing less." And with that, he turned and headed for the exit, leaving Harper to gather her sparse belongings, a new, perilous path stretching out before her.

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