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Among the Ashes

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Introduction

Two years ago, there was a flash in the sky, a tremor in the earth, and then the world began to unravel. What once thrummed with the soft glow of electronics and the bustle of everyday life fell silent overnight. Cities became mausoleums; roads cracked and split beneath the weight of a thousand, hurried footsteps fleeing into the unknown. In the smoldering aftermath, the remnants of humanity scrambled to survive, scavenging what little remained as the bones of civilization decayed around them. There are no working radios now, no signal to call for help. The silence is broken only by the wind through twisted steel and the weary breaths of those who refuse to give up.

Among these survivors, Mia Schneider moves with a purpose sharpened by fear and love. She was only seventeen when the world ended, her life split into a before and an after. She has learned how to blend with shadows, how to ration food and water, how to comfort her younger brother Max through the endless nights. Each day is a battle—a routine of constantly scanning the horizon, anticipating threats both human and otherwise. Yet, in the private hours before dawn, Mia allows herself a flicker of hope: that somewhere out there, beyond the gray wastelands and the shattered towns, there might be something more.

The journey so far has not been gentle. Mia and Max have seen kindness extinguished and cruelty ascend in the power vacuum. Law is forgotten. A simple act of trust can be fatal, compassion is a risky luxury, and every stranger is a potential enemy. Still, the siblings have managed to keep moving, retreating further into the wild as danger closes in. They hold on to the whispered memory of their parents—torn from them the night the world fell—and to each other, as everything familiar drops away.

When word reaches them of a haven—rumors carried on desperate voices and hurried footsteps—their refuge is upended. A distant settlement, said to have gardens and clean water, guarded from the chaos. For Mia, hope is both a balm and a torment. She knows what it means to risk everything for the slimmest chance at safety. But as Max's eyes plead and her memories press in, she realizes it's a risk they can no longer afford not to take.

As their path emerges from the rubble, Mia is forced to confront the brittle edges of her own resolve. The wastelands beyond are merciless; survival means compromise, and every step forward is paid for in sweat, blood, or sacrifice. Yet amid the ruins, Mia finds moments of unexpected grace: a stranger's helping hand, the hush of dawn after a sleepless night, Max's stubborn laughter in the face of despair.

This is their journey—from the cinders of what was, through the dangers of what is, and toward the glimmer of what might be. Hope is a fragile thing, but among the ashes, it endures.

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CHAPTER ONE: Smoke on the Horizon

The smell of woodsmoke was a rare comfort, a phantom limb of a world that no longer existed. But today, it carried a sharper edge, a metallic tang that Mia knew instantly. Not from a cooking fire, not from a scavenger's desperate attempt to stay warm. This was the acrid scent of burning rubber and something else... something organic and deeply wrong. She tightened her grip on the rusted crowbar, its weight familiar in her hand, a meager extension of her own will to survive.

Max, a shadow just behind her, stumbled. "What is that, Mia?" His voice was a reedy whisper, thin from hunger and the constant gnawing fear. He was only eight, but his eyes held a wisdom far beyond his years, born of two winters spent dodging dangers most adults couldn't fathom. He clutched his worn teddy bear, Mr. Snuggles, as if its threadbare fur could ward off the encroaching dread.

"Stay low, Max," Mia murmured, her own voice barely audible. She pressed herself against the crumbling brick wall of what used to be a corner store, its shattered display windows like vacant eyes staring out at the desolation. The city, or what remained of it, stretched out before them – a jagged horizon of skeletal buildings, choked with weeds and the debris of a vanished era. They had been seeking refuge in its skeletal remains for the past few days, hoping to find a few cans of anything edible before moving on.

A column of black smoke coiled lazily into the bruised afternoon sky, just two blocks east. Too close. That was the direction they'd planned to head, the faint whisper of a long-abandoned highway that might offer a clearer path. Now, the smoke hung there, a dark question mark over their immediate future. Mia squinted, trying to discern the source, her heart thudding a frantic rhythm against her ribs.

It looked like a vehicle, or what used to be one. A bus, perhaps? Its twisted metal skeleton was silhouetted against the hazy sun, and around it, figures moved. Too many figures. Her hand went instinctively to the small, dull knife tucked into her belt. The crowbar was for breaking things, the knife for defending against the things that broke.

"We need to move, Max," she said, pulling him gently, but firmly, into a deeper alleyway. The air here was still and heavy, smelling of damp earth and decay. Twisted rebar jutted from concrete, and shattered glass crunched under their worn boots. Every sound seemed amplified in the unnatural quiet of the ruined city.

Max coughed, a dry, rasping sound. He'd been ill for days, a low-grade fever that

wouldn't break, and the hunger had carved hollows beneath his eyes. Mia had traded their last decent blanket for a handful of questionable antibiotics from a twitchy, one-eyed man in the northern district, but they hadn't done much good. Max needed real food, clean water, and rest – things that were luxuries in this broken world.

“Where do we go?” he asked, his voice cracking. He looked up at her, his big brown eyes filled with a vulnerability that tore at her. He depended on her for everything, for every decision, every scrap of hope. And sometimes, the weight of that dependence was crushing.

“Away from there,” Mia said, glancing back at the smoke plume. The figures around the burning wreckage seemed to be scavenging, or worse. She'd seen what desperation did to people. She'd seen them turn on each other for a half-eaten tin of beans, for a pair of worn boots. Survival bred a different kind of monster than the ones from the stories their parents used to read.

They moved slowly, cautiously, deeper into the labyrinthine alleys, using the shadows as their cloak. Mia scanned every window, every doorway, every rooftop. Her senses were always on high alert, a constant hum of awareness that had replaced the simple joys of youth. A snapped twig, a distant cry, the faint glint of metal – any of these could mean danger.

She remembered the last time they'd encountered a group like this. They called themselves the 'Reapers,' a crude militia that had swept through a small encampment they'd found, taking what they wanted and leaving ruin in their wake. Mia had hidden Max in a drainage pipe, covering his mouth to stifle his sobs as she watched, helpless, from afar. That memory was a cold knot in her stomach, a constant reminder of how easily everything could be taken.

“Mia, I'm tired,” Max whimpered, his steps dragging. He stumbled again, almost falling.

Mia knelt, ignoring the sharp pain in her knees. Her own muscles ached, her stomach growled with a persistent emptiness. But she pushed it down, as she always did. Max came first. She ruffled his dusty hair, trying to conjure a reassuring smile she didn't feel. “Almost there, champ. Just a little further. We'll find a place to rest, I promise.”

They pushed on, the air growing heavier with the coppery scent of dust and rust. The sun began its slow descent, painting the western sky in hues of orange and bruised purple – a beautiful, indifferent backdrop to a world in ruins. Nightfall was the most dangerous time. That was when the unseen things stirred, when the desperate grew bolder, and when the chill bit deepest.

They found a hollowed-out bus, overturned and partially buried in rubble, its interior

surprisingly intact. It wasn't much, but it offered shelter from the wind and a modicum of concealment. Mia checked the perimeter, her crowbar held ready, before ushering Max inside. The seats were torn, stained, but they provided a semblance of comfort.

"Stay here. Don't make a sound," she instructed, her voice low and firm. She pulled a tattered blanket from her small backpack, one of the few remnants of their old life, and spread it over him. Max curled into a tight ball, clutching Mr. Snuggles, his small body trembling.

Mia stood sentinel at the broken door of the bus, peering out into the gathering twilight. The column of smoke was still visible, a black finger pointing towards the heavens. She wondered what else they had been burning. Possessions? People? She didn't want to think about it.

Her gaze drifted to the distant hills, shrouded in the deepening gloom. It was in conversations with a lone traveler, a man with haunted eyes and a persistent cough, that she'd first heard the whispers of the haven. A settlement called 'Elysium,' far to the west, beyond the treacherous Salt Flats, a place where people lived in relative safety, where there was clean water and even... food. He'd drawn a crude map on a scrap of paper, a zig-zagging line through nameless towns and dead zones.

At first, Mia had dismissed it as a desperate fantasy, another cruel trick of the mind in a world devoid of comfort. But then, other whispers had followed, faint echoes carried on the wind, stories from wary faces around flickering campfires. Each story added a new detail, a new layer of possibility to the myth of Elysium. A wall, a communal garden, a leader who believed in a semblance of order.

The thought of it, even now, sent a jolt through her - a terrifying mix of hope and profound skepticism. Hope was dangerous. It made you vulnerable, made you take risks. And she couldn't afford risks, not with Max.

But watching Max shiver, listening to his ragged breathing, the idea of a place of safety, a true sanctuary, gnawed at her resolve. Could it be real? Could it be worth the unimaginable journey? The wastelands were vast, unforgiving. Bandits, mutated animals, and the elements themselves were constant threats. The Salt Flats alone were rumored to be impassable, a death trap for the unwary.

She closed her eyes, the image of her parents flashing behind them. Their faces, blurred by time and trauma, haunted her dreams. They had been separated in the chaos of the "Flash," as some called it - the initial, unexplained event that plunged the world into darkness. Mia had promised them she would keep Max safe, a vow whispered into the terrifying night as the world tore itself apart. It was a promise that had become her anchor, her singular purpose.

The smoke continued its ascent, a grim reminder of the world she inhabited. Elysium felt like a fairy tale, a cruel mirage. But Max was fading, and her resources were dwindling. She had to consider it, however foolhardy it seemed. The decision was a heavy stone in her gut. Stay here, cling to the familiar dangers, or chase a ghost across a dying land?

A low groan from Max stirred her. She looked at him, huddled in the gloom, his face pale and drawn. He was her reason, her only reason. And for him, she would walk through fire. The thought solidified in her mind, cold and hard. They couldn't stay. They had to try. Tomorrow, they would begin the impossible journey. Towards the smoke, and then, beyond it. Towards Elysium, or whatever lay at the end of hope.

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