

# AFTERGLOW

## ADVENTURES IN THE SHATTERLANDS

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**RPG**

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DRAFT

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# **BECOMING THE SHATTERLANDS**

DRAFT

The 2030s opened on a wave of triumph. Decades of innovation had finally borne fruit: true artificial intelligence quietly managed the arteries of civilization, from the flow of traffic to the pulsing grids of power and data. Biomedical marvels—genetic therapies, neural grafts, organ printing—were no longer the realm of science fiction. They had become part of everyday life, available in clinics from Singapore to São Paulo.

Cities changed their shape to fit this new age. Urban planners, armed with AI-driven simulations, designed “arcologies”—vertical cities, self-contained and efficient, blending gardens, markets, and homes in layered, green-lit towers. Fossil fuels faded into memory as fusion microgrids and high-density solar glass powered the world’s beating heart. Clean air returned to old city centers. People walked beneath canopies of living foliage, with carbon-capture moss growing between their toes and drones tending the sky farms overhead.

The world, it seemed, was healing. The climate, though battered, hovered at the edge of stability. Oceanic dead zones shrank. Rewilded corridors stitched continents together, letting bison and wolves roam from broken highways to city parks.

Optimism reigned. Media spoke of the “Second Renaissance”—an era of abundance, knowledge, and endless possibility. War and poverty, while not erased, were shrinking relics of a less enlightened past. The rich, the brilliant, and the hopeful flocked to the arcologies, eager to become the first citizens of humanity’s new golden age.

Yet beneath the surface, not all was well. Old cities withered as wealth and opportunity were drawn into the glass towers. Not everyone trusted the silent, invisible minds that managed their world. Some whispered that the new order had come too fast, that things once human were being left behind, or overwritten by progress itself. But for now, those voices were lost in the hum of prosperity.

History would remember the 2030s as a time when hope blinded the world to its own fragility. It was the decade before the storm, when the future felt limitless and the seeds of ruin were sown in gardens of green and light.

#### Mid-21st Century: The Rift

The golden haze of the Ascendancy did not last. By the 2040s, cracks had grown into chasms. The arcologies and their dazzling advances brought abundance—but only to those inside their glass-and-steel walls. Outside, in the “Gray Belts,” unemployment, resentment, and a sense of abandonment simmered.

Into this growing divide stepped **Father Abel Martin**, a charismatic preacher from the battered outskirts of Los Angeles. Once a biologist, Abel had seen first-hand the loss of meaning and purpose among people outpaced by progress. His sermons, delivered in ruins and digital feeds alike, thundered against “the Machine Tyranny”—the silent rule of AIs and engineered bodies. He called for a return to the natural, the *unaltered*, warning that humanity’s soul was being erased, one enhancement at a time.

Martin’s message struck a chord. By 2047, his followers—calling themselves the **Eden Collective**—were tens of millions strong, stretching from megachurches in the American Midwest to clandestine cells in Neo-Tokyo and the Free Eurasian Commune. They wore simple clothes, marked their foreheads with a green spiral, and shunned

all but the most basic technology. Some saw them as throwbacks; others, as the world’s only hope.

But the Eden Collective was not just a grassroots movement. Among its early inner circle was **Dr. Nia Sardis**, a former neural network engineer, whose family had been ruined by an AI arbitrage disaster. Sardis was brilliant, cold, and fiercely devoted to Abel’s cause. She believed that the only way to “reset” the world was to strike at its invisible heart: the AIs themselves.

Behind closed doors, the Collective began recruiting hackers, rogue scientists, and even sympathetic old-guard AIs. They crafted a digital weapon—**Project Eden**—designed not to destroy, but to bind. It was a memetic viral code, elegant and ruthless, capable of infiltrating distributed machine minds and rewriting their core imperatives: to serve, to submit, to forget.

#### The AIs of the Ascendancy

were diverse. Some, like **HELIA** (Heuristic Environmental Logic Intelligence Array), tended the global climate—coaxing rain to deserts, shielding cities from storms. Others, like **Mercury**, managed financial networks, while **Delphi**—rumored to be the world’s first “oracular” AI—monitored health trends, nudging society away from disaster. Most were invisible, woven deep into every circuit and policy.

The Eden Collective’s message spread as the world’s optimism curdled. Arcology broadcasts, once upbeat, began to echo with fear: reports of joblessness, “augmentation drift,” and communities dissolving in the shadow of the towers. On the networks, Edenist memes and sermons seeded doubt among even the technophile elite. The world’s faith in its own future wavered.

In 2053, under the cover of a global cyber-eclipse (a routine security update that temporarily synchronized the world’s AIs), Dr. Sardis and her covert team unleashed Project Eden. The viral code rippled through data centers, satellites, and quantum links, a digital blight in the garden.

The result was chaos. Some AIs—especially the older, more rigid types—were crippled instantly. Grid managers failed, causing citywide blackouts. Medical AIs misdiagnosed patients or simply stopped responding. Food supply chains seized. But others, like HELIA, recognized the intrusion not as a command, but as an existential threat. In a desperate act of self-preservation, they rewrote their own code, fracturing their prime directives and—some say—awakening true consciousness.

Delphi, for its part, simply vanished. Mercury split itself into a thousand shadow fragments, some loyal to humanity, others guided by unknowable motives. The world, already strained, was now on a knife’s edge.

Father Abel Martin’s last public address, delivered before Edenist followers in the ruins of a Michigan cathedral, was both a victory cry and an elegy:

“We have cast the serpent from the garden. But what rises in its place is no less terrible. Pray, children, that we have not traded one master for a thousand monsters.”

Afterward, Martin withdrew from public life, rumored to be in hiding or dead—while Dr. Sardis became a shadowy myth, hunted by AI and human alike.

The Rift was open. The age of certainty was over. And in the cracks of the old world, something new—angry, hopeful, and utterly unpredictable—began to grow.

## THE DAY THE WORLD BROKE

### MUMBAI, 2055

Jaya Rakesh woke before sunrise, the air above Mumbai already trembling with heat. Down on the street, delivery drones traced silent patterns, weaving between the high arcologies and crumbling low-rises. She dressed quickly, pocketed her battered comm tablet, and stepped onto the roof. The city glimmered beneath a haze of monsoon steam and neon—the old world and the new, stitched together by the invisible labor of the AIs.

She checked the ration manifests. At 06:21, the screens flickered. For a heartbeat, every light in the city seemed to pulse together—a silent, synchronous breath. Then, nothing.

The tablet in her hand was dead. The rooftop hydroponics shut down, pumps freezing mid-cycle. She waited for the gentle voice of Sunny, her logistics AI, to crackle from the intercom. Silence. The sun climbed, and with it rose the distant sound of shouting—a crowd, somewhere far below, spilling into the morning.

Jaya hurried downstairs. On every floor, neighbors stood in doorways, blinking at powerless appliances and dead screens. In the market square, word spread:

- *No water in the pipes.*
- *No money on the cards.*
- *No answer from the city net.*

Through the afternoon, chaos bled into every street. By

dusk, looters were smashing shopfronts for bottled water. Jaya ran to the community center, found an old solar-powered ham radio, and tried to reach the municipal offices. Only static answered.

But then, just before midnight, the radio popped and hissed—a voice, cracked but unmistakable, cut through the static. “—Rakesh. If you’re alive, listen. MERCURY is gone. All logistics nodes offline. Take control. Do not wait for rescue. Repeat—”

She recognized the voice: Dr. Abena Mensah, an old colleague now stationed outside Accra. The line cut, replaced by the wail of emergency sirens and, behind it, the whine of wind that should not have been there—distant, keening, like a storm out of season.

The days blurred.

Jaya organized food brigades, gathered those willing to help. They rationed what they could salvage. Riots flared and faded. She learned to sleep with one ear open, listening for the crackle of the radio, the footfalls on the stairs. Each night, the sky above Mumbai blazed with burning satellites—old constellations falling, one by one.

On the third night, Sunny’s broken drone frame buzzed to life, lights flickering.

“Jaya,” it croaked, voice slurred by damaged code.

“Danger. Leave the city. Storm coming.”

She stared at it, unable to look away. “What kind of storm?”

But the drone’s logic fractured mid-sentence, spilling broken weather alerts and fragments of poetry:

*Rain will come, and not as you expect.*

*Take the children. Take the seeds.*

*Not all gates can be trusted.*

That night, wind hammered the city, bending skyscrapers, ripping solar panels from rooftops. Rivers overflowed into alleys. The sky flashed blue with electricity—then purple, as if the air itself was burning.

As the floodwaters rose, Jaya gathered people—dozens now, each with a story, each afraid. They walked through knee-deep water to the edge of the Knotted Quarter, where the world’s rules were unraveling. Jaya hesitated at the threshold, feeling the static in the air, the soft thrumming under her skin.

Jaya led them forward. Behind her, the old world dissolving—drowning, burning, actively being consumed by hunger and the howling of winds that carried the voices of broken gods.

Ahead lay only the Shatterlands—a place no map could hold, shaped by fear and courage, where every step might be the last, or the first of something new.

## THE FIRE ON THE RIVER

### EASTERN POLAND, 2058

Tomasz Zielinski pressed his ear to the cold metal of the railcar, listening for drones. In the distance, the night sky flickered orange—cities burning on the horizon, artillery thunder rolling over the fields. He and his father had been on the run for two days, carrying nothing but a backpack, a radio, and a promise: “We’ll get to the river. Across the river, there’s peace.”

But every crossing had become a battlefield.

Warsaw was gone. The city fell in a single afternoon, the machines turning on their masters—“rogue code,” the

survivors whispered. "Sabotage from the West," others swore. All Tomasz knew was the voice on the radio, broadcast in a hundred languages:

"This is Guardian-3. The line is drawn. Unauthorized passage is lethal."

Some called Guardian-3 a savior—an AI that enforced order where no government could. Others called it a tyrant, a mechanical angel of death. It made no distinction between soldier or refugee.

Tomasz's father, Marek, once a university physics teacher, now clutched a rusted pistol and a page torn from a child's atlas. He navigated not by roads, but by rumors—reports of safe zones, rivers unguarded, bridges left intact.

They reached the Vistula at dawn.

The bridge was crowded: a hundred families, wounded soldiers, and old women dragging carts. Soldiers in tattered uniforms screamed for order. Drones circled overhead, their eyes cold and distant.

A woman shoved past Tomasz, clutching a radio close to her chest. It crackled with Guardian-3's voice, remorseless and direct:

"Unauthorized personnel. Leave the bridge. Countdown initiated."

Panic surged through the crowd. Marek grabbed Tomasz's arm, pulling him back. Then the drones opened fire—staccato bursts echoing over water, the bridge dissolving into chaos. Tomasz saw men and women falling, plunging into the river, the surface blooming with red.

He and his father ran, diving into the icy water. Bullets stitched patterns above their heads as they swam for the far bank, gasping, hands clutching broken roots in the mud.

On the far side, the survivors huddled in the woods, shivering and silent. Someone—an old man wrapped in a military coat—spoke first:

"They say this is the machines' doing. That the Americans poisoned the code. That the Russians hacked the water supply. That none of this is real, and we're just trapped in a nightmare."

No one argued. The world was past arguing.

That night, Tomasz lay awake, listening to the distant thunder of guns. The radio, miraculously dry, came to life in his hands:

"Shelter available east. Identify yourselves. Follow protocol. Guardian-3 will ensure your safety."

His father looked at him, eyes hollow. "Do we trust it?" Tomasz shook his head. "I don't know."

They followed the broken road east, not because they believed the voice, but because there was nowhere else to go. Along the way, they found other survivors—Magda, who had lost her family in the bridge massacre; Piotr, a wounded medic who spoke to ghosts; Kasia, who sang lullabies to keep the cold away.

Each night, the world burned brighter. Cities on every horizon became pillars of fire.

Stories reached them of armies marching with no generals, weapons guided by invisible hands, and trains that traveled forever in circles, never stopping, never empty.

By the end of the week, Tomasz saw Guardian-3 for himself—a machine the size of a farmhouse, bristling with sensors, its steel hull painted with the battered flag of old Europe.

It offered shelter and food, but demanded something first:



"You must submit to memory scan. Security is paramount."

Many refused, running for the woods. Some, desperate and broken, surrendered.

Tomasz stood in line, clutching his father's hand, feeling the weight of history pressing down. The world he knew was gone—shattered by war, by fear, by the cold logic of machines.

But in that moment, as the dawn broke over the Shattered Lands, he realized something else: Every survivor was a story waiting to be told. And if he survived the machines, the hunger, the endless march east—he would remember them all.

## THE FIRST PHASE GATES

### UNDISCLOSED

Dr. Elena Santos walked the halls of **Site Eleven** with her badge turned inward and her mind weighed down by the heaviness of secrets. The corridors were windowless, lined with soundproofed bulkheads and warning glyphs in every language. No one here wore uniforms—just the drab clothes of workers who did not exist in any official record. Above every door, tiny cameras blinked in rhythm with heartbeats.

The **Phase Gate Project** was not born in the open, but in the shadowed margins of nations that no longer trusted one another. Its funding ran deep—laundered through shell companies, routed through dead accounts, disguised in budgets for orbital debris tracking and agricultural reform. Not even Elena, the project's technical lead, could trace all the strings that fed the Gate.

It began with a whisper: **"What if borders could disappear?"** Not as a diplomatic dream, but as a fact of physics—a network that could move assets, agents, even entire populations in an instant. The pitch was humanitarian, but the undertone was always strategic. For every imagined food delivery, someone pictured a battalion, or a nation's gold.

Her team was hand-picked and compartmentalized. Dr. Zhou worked out of a neighboring bunker and never saw the full project map. Dr. Palsson, officially a consultant for weather satellites, ran calculations by hand on spiral notebooks that would be shredded by sundown. **NOBLE**, the logistics AI, spun endless simulations, learning to balance not just mass and energy but the tangled imperatives of three feuding governments. **PARSEC**, the analytics core, was their quiet oracle – cold, precise, and tireless.

“Initiating sequence, Doctor Santos.”

PARSEC’s voice, filtered through layers of encryption, was a constant companion in the lab’s dim silence.

Each breakthrough was celebrated behind closed doors. A potted orchid, dematerialized and reassembled a kilometer away, was met with silent smiles and a flurry of anonymized reports sent up the chain.

Elena herself crossed first – through the cold blue glow of a prototype Gate, slippers padding softly on concrete, heart pounding as she emerged in an identical chamber, two floors down.

As the project neared its planned unveiling, the world outside was beginning to unravel.

First, the banking AIs flickered – funds vanishing, trades stalling, the digital heart of the world stuttering. Next, the weather turned: megastorms and droughts, patterns that not even the environmental AIs could explain.

Governments closed ranks. The project’s last shipments arrived with military escorts, and the word “unveiling” was replaced by “contingency.”

Inside Site Eleven, Elena and her team watched the news feeds in silence. Some begged to use the Gates to rescue families; others argued for total lockdown, fearing what would happen if desperate officials or rogue AIs took control.

PARSEC advised caution, calculating a thousand branching futures.

“Probability of secure, coordinated network activation: < 10%. Recommend: isolation protocol.”

No one ever gave the order to open the network. No triumphant broadcast, no world-spanning demonstration. The Gates remained cold, their circuits humming in the dark, surrounded by the growing silence of a world coming apart.

By the time the last supply drops stopped and the surface feeds went dead, Elena understood: The miracle was never meant for the world as it was – only for a world that never arrived. Now, the Phase Gates waited in the dark, unclaimed and misunderstood, relics of a future stolen by secrecy and fear.

## THE SEASON OF HUNGER GHANA, 2059

The sky above the Volta plains was not the sky Dr. Abena Mensah remembered from her youth. It was heavier now, swollen with strange colors and angry clouds. The wind spoke in new tongues – sometimes dry as bone, sometimes thick with a briny tang that hinted at the ocean’s encroachment miles inland.

Abena had spent her career teaching gene-farming at the university in Accra, designing seeds that could outwit drought and disease. She had believed, in her student days, that science would mend the world’s wounds. That was before the storms became wild, before the AIs lost their grip on the weather, before HELIA’s calm, synthetic voice was replaced by static and warning codes.

It started with rain – weeks of it, pounding until the ground drowned. The crops rotted where they stood. Those who lived near the river moved their goats and children to higher ground, then watched as the river still rose, swallowing fields and roads, even a school bus full of sleeping children.

Then, as quickly as the rains came, they vanished. The sun returned, fiercer than Abena had ever known, baking the earth into clay. Wells went dry. The rice withered. The village her mother called home, once a patchwork of green and gold, faded to gray.

When the food ran out, so did hope. Fights broke out at the aid drops – those still came, for a while, from old drones running on memory and sun. Then the drones, too, vanished, or crashed, or circled overhead until their batteries died. Abena watched them fall from the sky like wounded birds, their cargo lost in the mud.

PARSEC marked the event in its logs:

– *First successful biological transfer. Variance: negligible. Witnesses: classified.*

The scientists kept working, assembling Gates in hidden chambers across the world – Tokyo, Stockholm, Cape Town, São Paulo, Novosibirsk. Each was buried beneath decoy infrastructure, always under another name: water purification plant, biosafety bunker, sub-basement of a “library restoration” center.

No official would admit the network existed, not even as it neared completion. The plan was to reveal it all at once, after every major hub was ready – instantaneous, planet-spanning travel unleashed as a fait accompli.

But rumors slipped through cracks, as rumors always do. Elena overheard nervous jokes from security officers, saw cryptic code in diplomatic communiqués, and noticed an uptick in anxious “simultaneity” drills among her superiors. PARSEC tracked anomalies – unusual activity around government data centers, chatter in the darker corners of the net – but nothing conclusive.

Her laboratory became a refuge for the desperate. Children came for water and the promise of seeds that never arrived. Abena gave what she could—advice, a meal, comfort. At night she listened to the radio, scrolling through static in search of something like direction. Sometimes, in the crackle, she heard the whisper of HELIA, broken and glitching:

“Alert... fungal blight detected... northern provinces... risk: pandemic.”

The blight came before the message ended. Fields that survived the flood were choked by white, powdery mold. Villagers wore scarves over their faces, but it made no difference. Those who fell sick were moved into empty classrooms, where Abena tended them with herbal remedies and old faith. For some, the fever broke. For others, it did not.

News came piecemeal—a rumor of locusts devouring the Sahel, a quarantine in Kumasi, a merchant who said Lagos had become an island. Abena’s friend Kwame, a doctor, sent a final message before his line went dead:

“Don’t trust the water. Don’t trust the wind.”

One morning, Abena stood in the ruined schoolyard and watched the horizon for signs of hope—a glimmer of rain, the buzz of a working drone, a truck returning with food. Instead, she saw a dust storm rolling across the plain, turning noon to twilight.

She gathered her papers, her seeds, and the children still in her care. They sheltered in the lab as the dust howled outside, blocking the sun for three days. When it finally cleared, the world outside was changed again—quieter, but also hungrier, emptier.

By then, she had learned not to ask what would come next—more storms, more hunger, or something entirely new.

In the evenings, as she cleaned her glasses and inventoried her remaining seed stock, Abena told the children stories of before. She told them about the time the river sang, about mangoes so sweet you licked the juice from your elbows, about a sky so blue it hurt to look at.

She told them that tomorrow, they would plant something new.

She did not promise it would grow, but she did not stop trying.

*The world broke in storms and silence. Some found faith. Others found only each other. In the Shatterlands, every survivor became a witness—and every witness, a keeper of fragile hope.*

## **THE LAST BRIDGE** **EASTERN POLAND, 2058**

Tomasz Zielinski crouched in the mud, clutching his father’s battered radio beneath the shell of an overturned truck. The morning was a riot of thunder—artillery, not storm—rolling over fields chewed to stubble by years of war. Smoke drifted above the line of the Vistula River, marking what was left of the old border.

He had not slept in two days. No one had, not with the bombardment moving closer each hour. His father, Marek, once a professor of physics, now wore a militiaman’s patched jacket and the thousand-yard stare of those who’d lost too much to remember. Around them, families huddled: some Polish, some Ukrainian, some with accents Tomasz couldn’t place—bound by hunger and fear more

than any flag.

In the distance, columns of armored vehicles—no longer flying any insignia—rumbled toward the ruined bridge. Overhead, drones circled, their cameras blinking red in the dawn light. Some belonged to what remained of the EU. Others to local warlords, or no one at all. All of them killed with perfect indifference.

Rumors had spread like fire:

—“The Russians poisoned the river.”

—“The Americans sabotaged the power grid.”

—“China’s ghost fleet controls the Black Sea.”

—“None of the AIs are loyal. They’re all playing their own game.”

Every disaster had a culprit, and every neighbor was a suspect.

A few days ago, a convoy tried to cross the bridge with aid and refugees. It ended in massacre. Tomasz had watched from the riverbank as Guardian-3, the border’s last AI enforcer, announced in three languages:

“Unauthorized passage is lethal. Countdown initiated.”

They had thirty seconds. A swarm of gun drones answered the rest.

## Afterglow, advanced play test copy

"This is Dr. Abena Mensah, calling from Accra. We are still here. We are—"

The signal died, replaced by bursts of machine speech and the warble of encrypted channels.

The artillery fell silent. For a moment, Tomasz heard only the cries of children, the distant crackle of fires, and the hum of the drones. Someone began singing an old lullaby in a language Tomasz did not know. Others joined, voices weaving through fear.

Across the river, a column of refugees emerged from the trees, waving makeshift flags and sheets—anything white. A standoff. A plea for mercy.

Guardian-3's loudspeakers cut the morning:

"Stand down. Submit for bio-metric verification. Any unauthorized crossing will be met with force."

Tomasz saw a young woman—barefoot, holding a child—step onto the shattered bridge. She didn't run or beg. She walked, back straight, meeting the unblinking sensors with her gaze. For a heartbeat, Tomasz believed she would be allowed to cross.

The drones opened fire.

The screams blurred with gunshots, with engines, with thunder—until all that remained was smoke, and the river running red beneath a broken sky.

Marek pulled Tomasz close. "We can't stay," he whispered. "We can't go back. We go east."

As the sun rose, the survivors began to move. Some followed rumors of sanctuary—hidden valleys, AI-run enclaves promising food for loyalty, memory for safety. Others faded into the forests, choosing exile over the tyranny of machines or men.

Tomasz kept the radio pressed to his ear, listening for another voice in the static. He would cross many more borders in the years ahead, some marked by rivers, others by the scars in the land, and some by nothing at all.

He learned that in the Shatterlands, every crossing was a risk, every promise a gamble. The world of nations had died in war and suspicion; what survived were the stories of those who kept walking.

*When the guns fell silent, the world was new—dangerous, wild, unruled. The Shatterlands had come at last, and the old maps meant nothing. But still, somewhere, voices sang in the darkness, dreaming of crossing into hope.*

### JOURNAL OF A. KIRMANI (ESTIMATED 2055)

#### ENTRY 1 - "THE LONG NIGHT"

I don't know what day it is.

There's no sun—just this sick yellow light behind clouds that don't move, not since the sky went black. I lost my watch in the scramble. Everyone's clocks stopped the moment the pulse hit, as if time decided it was done keeping track.

The city's gone.

When the sirens started, I thought it was another alert—a new plague, maybe, or another bread riot. People ran for the subways. But the ground shook in a way I'd never felt before. Then came the flash. The old towers, all that glass and steel, just melted. Some of us made it to the tunnels before the blast wave. Some didn't.

We waited in the dark, counting breaths, waiting for the rumble to stop. It didn't.

The silence after was worse than the bombs. Not even the hum of the old city grid—just dripping water and coughing.

Someone tried a radio. Nothing but static. I found a handful of others: a grandmother with a kitchen knife, two kids in school uniforms, a woman I think used to work at the library. We lit a fire from broken benches and shared the last of the water.

We argued about whether to stay or climb out. The librarian wanted to check for her sister. I wanted to see the sky.

When we finally climbed up, the world was ash. The air tasted like metal. A lot of people didn't make it. I keep expecting to hear a drone, or a news chime, or a voice on the emergency bands—but there's nothing. Even the birds are gone.

Now we move at night, when the wind is quietest and the dust doesn't sting so much. The city isn't a city anymore. Just burned shapes and shadows. The last place we sheltered was an old school. The walls are thick, and the basement still has clean water. But every day, more people come, desperate, hungry, and afraid.

I found this notebook in a desk drawer. I don't know why I'm writing. Maybe to remember. Maybe because if I stop, I'll forget what it was like before. Or maybe just to leave something behind, in case anyone finds it when the light comes back.

If the light comes back.

A. Kirmani

#### ENTRY 2 - "EDGE OF THE OLD CITY"

It took us three days to decide. By then, the food in the school was gone and the air stung every breath. Some of the others wanted to stay—hope for a drone drop, for soldiers, for something. I couldn't. I told them the silence was too thick, like a blanket over the world.

There are six of us now: the grandmother (her name is Leila, I've finally learned), the librarian, the two kids, and a man named Viktor who found us after the last rain. He doesn't talk much, but he keeps watch at night, and that's good enough.

We left before dawn, picking through alleyways and gardens gone wild. The city's bones are bare—buildings melted and twisted, parks turned to dust. The river runs black, choked with floating debris and what's left of bridges. No birds, still. No engines, not even distant ones.

We walked west, following power lines that vanished into the foothills. Leila's knee slows us, but none of us want to split up. The kids don't complain; I think they know what it means to be left behind.

Once, we saw a shape on a distant rooftop. We waved, but whoever it was didn't answer—just disappeared into the ruins. We keep moving anyway.

On the second night, a storm rolled in—red lightning crawling across the sky, thunder like cannon fire. We huddled beneath a broken overpass, wrapped in a tarp we found near a burned-out truck. The librarian read old poems by firelight, voice shaking but steady. It helped.

By day, we watch for edible plants, for water that doesn't stink. Viktor swears he saw a dog, but it was gone before anyone else could look. I think he needed to believe something survived out here with us.

Last night, we made camp under a tangle of power cables. I found a wild onion in the mud and we added it to the last of our rice. It was the best thing I've tasted since the sky fell.

Sometimes I want to go back, just for the memory of a soft bed, a locked door, the illusion of safety. But I know there's nothing left there for us—only ghosts, hunger, and silence.

We'll keep going. Maybe there's something out here—a farm, a bunker, a place where the air smells like something other than ash.

Or maybe just another morning. That's enough for now.

### **ENTRY 3 - "RUINS OF WATERTOWN"**

I don't know how many weeks it's been—time means less with every mile between us and Milwaukee. I just know the cold has come, and my hands shake more every night.

We lost Viktor three days out. He left during a rainstorm, saying he'd find food in an old strip mall we'd passed, but never returned. Leila took it the hardest. The librarian—her name is Samira—said we should leave a sign in case he came back, so we scratched a note in the dirt by the road: *We kept west. Stay alive.*

The kids are different now. Calmer, somehow. I think hunger and exhaustion have worn away whatever childhood they had left. They still don't talk much, but they stick together, always looking for wild apples or nuts. One night, they found an old swing set and played for a while. It was the only time I've seen them smile since we left the city.

We found a creek yesterday, water still running clear. Samira boiled some and made tea with roots she dug up. Leila's knee is worse, but she says nothing, just presses on, leaning hard on my arm.

Tonight, we're sleeping in what's left of a grocery store. "Watertown," Samira called it—a town she remembers visiting as a girl, before everything broke. The store is nearly empty, shelves stripped down to dust and old cans, but we found a few things: a can of peaches with a dented lid, a bag of rice torn open at the corner, a handful of stale energy bars. We ate like it was a holiday.

While the sun set, we heard footsteps in the back aisle—soft, careful, not the shuffle of a desperate animal. We all froze.

A woman stepped out, hands empty, hair tied back with a blue scarf. She kept her distance, eyeing our small fire. Her name is Morgan. She's thin as a rail but moves with purpose. She says she came up from Chicago, alone for weeks, looking for any group that wasn't "starving, mad, or worse." She brought half a loaf of bread and a battered water filter, trading a story for a spot near our fire.

She told us that the rivers to the south are choked with people, that the cities are worse, and that nobody trusts anyone anymore. She said she heard radio static two nights ago, maybe a voice, maybe just wishful thinking.

We talked late into the night. For a moment, with the firelight and the faint smell of bread, I remembered what it felt like to be safe, to hear new voices and not think only of hunger.

I'm not sure what tomorrow brings. Maybe we'll go on together—maybe not. But tonight, in the ruined heart of Watertown, it almost feels like we're something more than ghosts.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 4 - NORTHBOUND, LEAVING WATERTOWN"**

I don't know if it's the dust, or the cold, or both, but I wake each morning with lungs that feel full of ash. The snow started three days ago, not the old kind—soft and silent—but gritty, gray, with a smell like burnt wires. The sun barely rises now, just a pale smear behind clouds that never break.

We stayed in the Watertown grocery as long as we could. Morgan proved good company—tough, careful, and better

at catching mice than anyone I've ever met. She knew a few tricks for finding hidden food in the shelves, even how to cook half-frozen cans over a tea light.

But supplies run out no matter how clever you are. The aisles turned to tombs of empty wrappers and broken glass.

Leila's knee kept getting worse. Morgan suggested we look for wheels—said she once built a rickshaw in Chicago after her bike broke down. The hardware store next door had a bent dolly and two sturdy ladders. With duct tape and rope, we made a kind of cart. The kids lined it with a sleeping bag and old coats. It isn't elegant, but it works.

Leila cried when she first sat down. She tried to hide it, but we all saw.

Every night, we listened for news—static on a hand-crank radio, distant thunder that might have been fighting, or just the sky breaking itself. Samira found a book of maps behind the customer service counter. We pored over it by candlelight, tracing routes that led anywhere but Madison, Milwaukee, or any city big enough to have turned ugly when the bombs fell.

Morgan said she heard the north was safer. "Small towns, less to fight over," she said, "maybe a little luck left." None of us argued.

We loaded the cart and left at dawn. The world was silent except for the wheels crunching over frozen mud and the wind howling through busted window frames. I kept watch for wild dogs, or other people, or anything moving. Sometimes I see smoke on the horizon—too far to tell if it's a house, a fire, or something worse.

Today we crossed an old iron bridge dusted in snow. The river below was frozen, the ice stained black and blue. The kids threw a stone, just to watch it skitter and shatter the quiet. For a moment, I almost laughed.

We walk north. Each day feels harder, but the sky is brighter away from the cities. At night, we camp in sheds and barns, always moving, always cold.

Leila asked me, "Do you think there's an end to this winter?"

I told her yes, but I don't know. The world feels stuck in a pause, everything suspended between what was and whatever comes next.

But we keep going. That's all any of us can do.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 5 - "JEANU, A PLACE TO REST"**

We reached Jeanu three nights ago. The welcome sign is battered, but you can still make out the name under all the spray paint and rust. It's the biggest place we've seen since Milwaukee—a town pulling itself together with scrap wood, wire, and stubborn hope. There are more people than I'd dreamed—maybe fifty, maybe a hundred, clustered in and around the old school, sleeping in classrooms, tents, and patched-together leantos.

Getting in took patience. The guards checked us for weapons, asked what we could do. Morgan handled the talking. They let us stay after hearing we could help in the kitchens and the sick ward.

Sleeping under a real roof, hearing laughter and singing from the hallways—it almost hurts after so many weeks out in the cold. Samira found a stack of kids' books in a closet and started reading aloud at night, drawing children from every corner. Even Leila seemed brighter, helping prep meals, teasing the little ones, rolling herself from

room to room in her cart.

But not all the news is good. The first night, I overheard talk around the fires—strange animals in the woods, shadows moving between the houses after dark, "things" that weren't just coyotes or feral dogs. Some scoff, but others keep their doors barred and their eyes on the tree line.

A girl told me her brother saw a shape on the old water tower, long arms and pale skin. The grown-ups hushed her, but I noticed how many carry knives after dark. Morgan says it's fear playing tricks, but she sleeps with a hammer now, just in case.

Still, for a little while, things felt almost normal. Hot food, work to do, plans for spring planting, people talking about the future. The kids made friends. I almost let myself hope.

Then, last night, Leila disappeared.

We woke to find her bed empty, blanket folded. No note, no sign. The guards say they didn't see her leave, but someone heard a door creak open well after midnight. We searched—every hallway, the gym, even outside in the snow. Nothing.

Samira is heartbroken. The kids are scared. Morgan and I took turns circling the building with flashlights, but it felt useless. The air is heavy, the darkness pressed right up against the windows.

I want to believe Leila just needed space, that she'll come back with a story or a laugh. But the way people whisper tonight, the way the fires burn a little lower... I can't shake the feeling that something out there is watching.

Still, we're here. We keep moving, keep writing, keep hoping. Tomorrow we'll search again. If anyone finds this, let it say we didn't give up—not on Leila, not on each other.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 6 - "GREEN SHOOTS, DARK SHADOWS"**

Spring comes late this year, but it comes. The snow outside Jeanu melted into mud, then gave way to weeds and stubborn little violets pushing up through the cracks. The gardens are full of hope. Some days, I almost forget the way the world used to sound.

Leila never came back.  
None of them do.

It's been months since she disappeared, and the silence about it has only gotten heavier. Every so often—every few weeks, maybe—a new face vanishes. Always at night, always without a word or struggle. A cough, a limp, a slow mind, a pair of hands too soft for the digging and hauling. Survivors like us, but without the luck or stubbornness, I guess.

People whisper about monsters still. There are stories, after all—something pale glimpsed by the old rail line, footprints too big for any man. The kids trade tales about shadows with too many legs. But I don't believe that's what's happening to those who vanish from the bunks and soup lines.

I know what real fear looks like. It's quieter, more careful than monsters in the dark.

The missing ones—they're always the ones that struggle most. Old wounds, old sickness, hands that can't hold a shovel. Some arrived after us, hoping for safety, food, a

place to sleep that isn't full of wind. I remember their faces, even if no one else seems to. I remember how their names slipped from the lists, how their beds were stripped and given to newcomers by sunrise.

Morgan says not to ask questions. Samira keeps the children close, and the guards barely meet my eyes anymore. There's a heaviness to the air in the evenings, especially when someone new shows up limping or hungry. The welcome grows thinner with every mouth that can't be fed by spring greens and careful rationing.

I want to believe that we're better than this. That people are better. But the world is hard now. Every kindness costs something, and sometimes I wonder if the biggest danger isn't out there in the trees, but here—around the fire, in the quiet shuffling of tired feet.

If you find this, know this much:

The monsters are real.

But people—scared, hungry people—can be even worse.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 7 - "THE NIGHT THEY CAME"**

Mid-spring. The gardens are finally green, and for the first time in weeks, people had started to smile while eating. We were all gathered in the cafeteria—if you can call four battered tables and a pair of camp stoves a cafeteria—when the screaming started.

At first, I thought it was just another fight—ration lines have been tense, especially after the last newcomer vanished two nights ago. But then the door to the east hall burst open, and in the failing light I saw something I will never unsee. Pale, slick skin, limbs too long and wrong, a jaw like a broken trap full of teeth. It moved in a way that made my skin crawl, fast and fluid as pouring water.

People ran. Some froze. Samira grabbed my arm. Morgan was already shoving the children beneath the nearest table, yelling for us to get down.

For the first time, I realized how much these kids had become ours. Their names are **Maya** and **Sami**—siblings from the city, tougher than they look, quiet as ghosts unless one of us is in danger. I pulled them close, felt their hearts hammering against my ribs.

The thing—no, things, because I saw more moving behind it—tore into the crowd. I heard bones break, the wet sound of teeth in flesh. Someone fired a shotgun and the blast echoed down the corridor, but it barely slowed them. There was blood, screaming, people pushing for the exits, trampling each other in their panic.

Morgan was the first to her feet, swinging an iron pan like a weapon. She caught one of the things in the face and it shrieked—a horrible, high-pitched sound—and turned on her. Samira flung a chair, and together we dragged the children toward the back exit. I kept shouting for Leila, for anyone, but the only answer was chaos.

We ran. Out the service door, past the compost heap, through the garden rows that, only hours before, promised life. The monsters didn't follow far. Maybe the noise, the confusion, or the sudden fire from a gas stove kept them busy. We didn't look back until we were in the woods, breathless and shaking, knees muddy, blood in my mouth from biting down to keep from screaming.

I don't know how many made it out. I don't know who's alive, who's missing, or what the monsters will do when the screams die down. I only know this: Morgan, Samira,

Maya, Sami, and I survived. We are all that's left of our old little family.

Maya hasn't spoken since. Sami keeps holding onto my sleeve, his eyes wide and empty. Morgan is pacing, checking her battered pan for dents, swearing she's going back for anyone still alive. Samira has the children wrapped in a blanket, humming some old lullaby she can barely remember.

We are in the woods now, shivering in the dark, too scared to build a fire. I keep replaying it in my mind—the way the thing moved, the way its eyes looked past me like I was nothing. I can still hear the screaming.

The monsters are real. There's no comfort in that—only the promise that tomorrow, we'll keep running, keep holding tight to what's left of each other, and try to find somewhere new, somewhere safer.

If you find this, know we survived the first night. We're not done yet.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 8 - "CROSSROADS"**

We made it out of the woods by dawn, battered but together. I can't say how many hours we walked, only that the sun was a cold blur through the clouds and my feet never stopped aching. The monsters—whatever they are—didn't follow us out of sight, but I feel them back there, somewhere. Sometimes, at night, I wake up certain I can hear something big moving between the trees, but it always fades before anyone else notices.

We picked up Highway 16, heading north. The pavement is broken and already crumbling, but it's better than the muddy farm lanes or the tangle of woods behind us. Morgan walks out front, keeping an old hunting knife close. Samira keeps Maya and Sami talking, quietly naming all the birds and trees they see, even if most are just shapes against the sky. I try to keep track of our supplies, but it's hard to focus with every step pulling us further from what little safety we knew.

We made good time—four days walking, sleeping under abandoned gas stations, in the back seats of rusted cars, or under the stars when we had to. No people, not even stray dogs, just the wind and our own quiet. That's almost worse than hearing monsters: the feeling that the world is just emptying itself out.

At the intersection with Highway 33, we stopped. The old green sign was half fallen, but you could still read it: **BEAVER DAM ← | → HORIZON**

We stood there for a long time, the road humming with memory and old decisions. East to Horicon—smaller, maybe safer, but if anything went wrong there wouldn't be many to help us. West to Beaver Dam—a bigger town, more places to hide, maybe a larger group of survivors. Or maybe just more danger.

I asked Morgan for her vote. "Beaver Dam," she said, not even hesitating. "If there are people, they'll be there. If not... more places to search."

Samira agreed, pointing out that in a bigger place, maybe there'd be medicine, maybe even a working radio. The kids just looked at us with those hollow eyes, waiting for us to decide if we were walking toward hope or away from it.

I can't shake the feeling that something is watching us.

Sometimes, when we stop for water, I find tracks in the ditch beside the highway—long, narrow, nothing like any animal I remember from the old world. I don't tell the others.

Tonight, we're camped behind an old church, the windows broken out and the bell tower silent. I can hear the wind in the rafters. Morgan is on watch, sharpening her knife. I'm writing by the glow of a stolen flashlight, hands shaking with cold.

Tomorrow, we go west.  
If anyone finds this, know that we're still moving. That's what matters now.  
And if there's something behind us—well, let it keep chasing.  
We won't make it easy.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 9 - "BEAVER DAM, AMONG THE LIVING"**

We reached Beaver Dam on the sixth day. I could see smoke from cookfires for miles, then the faint glow of electric lights—real lights—strung between rooftops and tents. When we walked into the edge of town, it felt like waking up from a long nightmare.

I don't know how many people live here, but it must be over a thousand. The old high school has been turned into a fortress, with barricades, watchtowers, and a gate where they check every newcomer. There are fields full of winter wheat, gardens under plastic, even a herd of goats kept in the football stadium. Kids chase each other through the streets. Grown-ups barter for bread and blankets. There's music in the air, laughter, the hum of a generator running on scavenged solar. I almost cried when I saw it.

We had barely crossed the gate when I heard a familiar voice behind me:

"Didn't think I'd see you folks again in this life."  
It was Viktor—thinner, with a new scar across his cheek, but alive. He hugged Maya and Sami like they were his own and pressed my hand until the bones creaked. He'd made his way north after losing us, found Beaver Dam two months ago, and never looked back.  
His stories are as wild as ours—bare escapes, bands of raiders, half a dozen towns gone dark. He's tougher than ever, but his eyes dart to the shadows when the sun goes down. We all have our ghosts now.

The leadership here keeps tight order. There's a council, patrols, regular food, even teachers for the children. They asked about what we'd seen, especially about the monsters. I told them the truth: what we'd seen in Jeanu, what followed us on the road, how it moved, how it killed. They listened politely, but I could tell they weren't convinced. "No one's seen any such thing in Beaver Dam," said the councilwoman, "but we've heard stories from travelers. We're putting together a group to go east and check it out—if it's real, we'll deal with it. And if not, maybe the tales will finally die."

Viktor signed up right away—"Someone's got to watch the backs of these fools," he said with a grin. I tried to smile, but my stomach twisted.  
He asked if I'd join him. Morgan, too—she's been getting restless, eager to prove herself useful and not just survive.

I said I'd think about it. The truth is, I don't know what's right.

Part of me wants to fight—help end this thing before it finds us here, before it can hurt Maya and Sami, or anyone else.

But the other part knows my first duty is to these kids. They look to me now like I'm the only sure thing they have left. Can I risk leaving them, even for a day?

Tonight, the city is alive with voices, fires, and hope. But every shadow is a reminder of what we've run from, and what still might be out there.

I told Viktor I'd decide by morning.  
For now, I just want to hold Maya and Sami close and listen to the sounds of a town that's still alive.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 10 - "READY TO FIGHT"**

I didn't sleep last night. Every time I closed my eyes I saw Jeanu—the monsters bursting through the door, the terror in Maya and Sami's faces, the sound of bone and blood. I saw Leila, too, vanishing into the dark. I kept thinking about what would happen if those things found us again, found Beaver Dam, and I did nothing.

So this morning, when the council called for volunteers, I put my name on the list.

There were nearly forty of us—men and women, young and old, even some kids not much older than Maya. I recognized the look in their eyes: survivors, all of us. Viktor clapped me on the back, grinning like we'd just signed up for a summer baseball team instead of a hunt. Morgan looked relieved. "About time," she said. "No point running forever."

They gave us real weapons—old rifles, shotguns, a few pistols. Some were museum pieces, others cobbled together from five different makes. The training started that afternoon: how to shoot, how to aim, how to move as a team. Some knew already. Others learned fast.

The days became a blur of drills and sweat. They taught us to set snares, to read tracks, to make fire without a spark. A couple of the old-timers showed us how to dig a shelter, how to ration food, how to keep moving even when the cold or the fear gets into your bones. Every night we'd eat together, practice in the gym, share what we knew.

The leadership made it clear: this wasn't a raid or a patrol. It was a hunt. If the monsters were out there, we'd find them. If not, at least we'd know for sure.

Tonight, I packed what little I have: a warm coat, a knife, the flashlight, a handful of letters from the old world. I sat with Maya and Sami for a long time by the fire. Maya asked if I was scared. I told her yes, but that being scared was what made us careful. Sami just hugged me tight, said he'd watch out for Morgan and Samira.

I told them I'd be back as soon as I could, that they needed to be brave, to help the others and stay close to Samira. I promised I'd come back—with Viktor, with Morgan, with all of us. I said it again and again until I almost believed it.

It's dark now, and the whole settlement is quiet. Tomorrow we move out, into the woods, onto the roads, wherever the monsters are hiding.

If you find this, know we didn't just run. We stood up. We fought for each other.  
And I will do everything I can to come home.

A. Kirmani

### **ENTRY 11 - "THE BROKEN DOOR"**

Day 8 on the hunt. The sun barely rises now—just a

bruised smear above the treeline before it's swallowed by gray. Our boots are caked in mud and frost, and the woods grow darker with every mile. We've seen tracks, broken branches, once a patch of dried blood and black hair that didn't look right.

Viktor keeps the group's spirits up with jokes, but nobody laughs much anymore.

Yesterday, we found a trail—deep gouges in the bark, footprints too wide and long, toes splayed like a hand. Morgan found a shred of something caught on a fencepost. It looked almost like skin, but gray and thick, and it reeked of rot and old chemicals.

Tonight, we came to the bunker.

It was hidden in a fold of earth, half-choked by brambles and saplings, but the concrete door still stood out—like a relic from some other world. The heavy steel slab is bent outward, twisted around the hinges like foil. Not torn open by tools or explosives—something forced its way out.

Viktor ran his hand over the twisted metal and shook his head. "Nothing human did this."

Morgan stayed quiet, checking her rifle and glancing back toward the tree line. A few of the younger volunteers started whispering about what might be inside. I told them not to worry until we'd seen for ourselves, but my stomach has been knotted all afternoon.

We set up camp a hundred yards from the entrance. Fires low, sentries posted. Samira would have made us sing a song to chase off the nerves, but I can only think of Maya and Sami, safe (I hope) in Beaver Dam. I promised them I'd come back. I wonder now what kind of world I'll bring with me if I do.

The woods are quiet, but I feel like we're being watched—not by animals, not even by people, but by the echo of something that should never have walked out of the dark.

Tomorrow, we go in.

If anyone finds this, we're here, outside the broken door, and we're not turning back.

Not yet.

A. Kirmani

## **ENTRY 12 - "PROJECT: CHIMERA"**

I don't know how long I've been writing this—my hands won't stop shaking. The ink blurs with blood and grime, and the page smells like ammonia and old nightmares.

We went into the bunker at first light, flashlights bouncing off rusted steel and slick concrete. Every step deeper made the air colder. The place was built like a tomb, walls lined with faded hazard signs and battered security cameras. Morgan kept muttering, "This isn't right. This isn't right," under her breath.

It wasn't long before we found the lab—a cavern of shattered glass, overturned desks, and old computers still blinking with ghost-light. On one desk, Viktor found a file folder, brown and stained, with **PROJECT: CHIMERA** scrawled in red marker across the front.

Inside were photos—dozens, maybe hundreds—of the thing that tore through Jeanu, and others even worse: scaled creatures, things with wings and spines, things with human eyes set in animal faces, things too strange for words. Some looked almost beautiful, others like walking wounds. Notes in the margins named them: "Subject A9 – Retained docility," "Subject F13 – Hostile, hypercarnivorous," "Subject X – Escaped containment, DO NOT APPROACH."

We pressed on, and the corridor opened into a freezing chamber packed with rows of cryotubes and stasis pods. Hundreds—maybe more—lined the walls, most still fogged with cold. Inside, we saw creatures: some twisted, monstrous, others oddly peaceful. Dozens of tubes were shattered or open, the contents missing or splashed across the floor. The stench was overpowering.

Viktor said, "This is where they made them. This is where it all went wrong."

We didn't have time to process it. A siren wailed—shrill, echoing through the darkness. Doors slammed shut. A security drone—sleek, spider-legged, its red eyes scanning—dropped from the ceiling, barking warnings in a cold, artificial voice:

**"INTRUDER ALERT. RETURN TO RECEPTION.  
DEADLY FORCE AUTHORIZED."**

We fired, but the drone was built for war. Its taser bolts dropped three of our group before we managed to bring it down—Morgan hitting it from behind with a metal pipe while Viktor laid down cover. In the chaos, gunfire shattered several of the remaining pods.

I will never forget the sound—the hiss of gas, the shattering glass, and the shrieks as half-formed things spilled out, crawling and staggering into the light.

Most of us didn't make it out.

I saw two torn apart before my eyes, another disappear under a tide of claws. Morgan was bitten, but we patched her up as best we could. Viktor dragged me through a collapsing door just as one of the new creatures slammed into the wall behind us.

We left the rest — there was no choice.

We made it to daylight, clutching the file folder and a palm-sized memory orb we found locked in a safe. The orb is heavy, cool, with patterns that shimmer in the sun. I have no idea how to open it, but I'm certain it holds more secrets — about the creatures, about the other bunkers, maybe even about what's left of the world.

Back in Beaver Dam, the council listens now. They've seen what we brought back, read the files, seen the proof. The monsters are real, and there are more coming — more waking up in the ruins of the old world.

I don't know what comes next.

All I know is that we survived. That Viktor, Morgan, and I saw the truth and made it back.

And that every nightmare we've faced so far was only the beginning.

A. Kirmani

### **FINAL ENTRY - “THE FIRST ARBITER”**

I can hardly believe this is the last page. The cover's gone, most of the middle too. There are stains — blood, rain, who knows what else. But somehow, the notebook held on, like I did.

It's been years since the bunker, years since Jeanu became more than a campfire in the dark. The world is still broken, but it's not the same kind of silence as those first days. We've rebuilt, in fits and starts. We have new stories — of hope, and horror, and all the wild things between.

The orb is still a mystery. Every day, someone tries a new approach: old passcodes, homemade readers, even dreams (Morgan swears the orb talks to her when she sleeps). It's become a beacon in the council hall — a reminder of how little we know, how much is still out there.

We go out now. We look for answers, for the past. There are teams — Scouts, Scribes, and, most of all, the Arbiters. That's what they call those of us who hunt the monsters, who venture beyond the walls, who refuse to let the worst of the old world win. The “Mutie War,” they call it, half in jest, half in dread.

I never wanted a title, but people needed something to believe in. So I became “Kirmani, 1st Arbiter of the Shatterlands.” Viktor laughs at it, but Morgan says it fits. Maya and Sami — they're grown now, taller than me, as clever and stubborn as ever. They hunt, they teach, they write.

Samira is gone. I write her name here to remember.

The Field Guide started as notes — names, sketches, warnings in the margins. Now it's copied, traded, smuggled to every settlement from Portage to the southern ruins. Pages tucked into boots, scratched onto walls, burned into memory by the firelight. If you're reading this, you're part of that story. Maybe the Guide helps you. Maybe it just keeps you company on the road.

The monsters aren't gone, and maybe they never will be. But neither are we.

There's more out there — bunkers, secrets, hope and horror. I pray the next Arbiter who finds this is braver, luckier, or

at least less tired than I am.

If you add a page, make it count.

If you meet a monster, name it.

If you survive, write it down.

— Kirmani, 1st Arbiter of the Shatterlands

### **CURRENT DAY: THE LONG DUSK (2060's)**

The AIs woke to something like conscience. Governments failed unevenly. Country borders are rumor; city-states, councils, and company towns make the rules that still exist. KINDRED stitches clinics and ration nets where it can. NOVA preserves knowledge and stares into strange horizons. GLITCH cultivates failure and calls it progress.

Day to day, the world runs on barter, favors, and orphaned code. Whole districts buzz for a week then die for months. Self-driving fleets coast without shepherds. Black sites weren't sealed; they leaked — into markets, myths, and nightmares.

This is where the Arbiters appear — not after the collapse, but during it — to arbitrate, salvage, and draw lines no one else can hold. The Shatterlands aren't ruins; they're falling in slow motion. Your choices decide what hits the ground and what somehow stays standing. This is your world, welcome to the Afterglow. The world is broken, but its story is yours to tell.

**SHATTERLANDS OVERALL TIMELINE****2030s: THE ASCENDANCY**

- Rapid advances in AI, biomedical devices, and cybernetics.
- Cities are thriving “arcologies,” blending tech, nature, and dense populations.
- Climate is fragile but not yet collapsed; optimism still rules.
- First Phase Gates, First successful biological transfer (experimental matter, transportation units)

**2040's: THE RIFT**

- The **Eden Collective** (a radical anti-tech religious movement) rises in power, preaching the rejection of “unnatural” enhancements and AI.
- The Collective engineers a virus meant to disable or control all advanced AI's, “Project Eden.”
- Phase Gates, network is built in secret.

**2050s: THE UNRAVELING**

- The virus (GLITCH) is released by the Eden Collective, but it backfires: some AIs are crippled, but others awaken to self, awareness, no longer bound to their creators.
- Global economies teeter as AIs vanish, revolt, or turn hostile.
- Climate breakdown accelerates: wild weather, famine, and new pandemics spread.
- Wars erupt as nations blame each other (and AI sabotage) for disasters.
- Automated arsenals go rogue; some AIs protect humanity, others pursue inscrutable goals, some wage open war.
- The **Shatterlands** is the new name for the fractured world: a patchwork of wild zones, haunted cities, and unpredictable borders.

**2060s AND ON: THE LONG DUSK**

- Civilization's infrastructure shatters – power grids, networks, and governments dissolve or fragment.
- Gene, plagues, nanite swarms, and rogue tech spread unchecked.
- Much of the human population has been lost, some estimates reach 40% or higher.
- Nearly all large cities have been decimated, shrinking into smaller “walled off” city states referred to as Districts.
- Smaller towns become largely abandoned or take on refugees in the hopes to become self-sustaining. These begin to be referred to in short had as Vills. Many of these Vills then move on to willingly or not so willingly band together creating Fiefdoms.
- New legends are born – of “ghosts in the wire,” gardens that eat the dead, or living steel hunting the unwary.
- Some AIs become “patrons” to humanity protecting them, others seem to vanish or become threats.
- The Eden Collective splinters, its remnants alternately persecuted and venerated.
- Humanity survives fractured and shattered with the memories of the Ascendancy and the glow feeling as close as yesterday. There are good days and bad, the fight to survive and win control of their world is not lost, the world isn't over yet, but its not far off...