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Under a Crimson Sky

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Introduction

The world had not always worn the color of blood. There are stories, whispered by those old enough to remember, of skies washed in gentle blues and sunlit warmth, of laughter lingering in winding streets and a city untouched by fear. But those memories are as distant as starlight through The Dominion's perpetual haze—a haze dyed crimson, a constant reminder of what had been lost, and the oppressive control now wielded over every breath, every heartbeat.

For Lira Solis, sixteen years in The Dominion had made the sky's color as ordinary as the harsh clang of morning sirens or the metallic taste of rationed water. Yet, even as conformity was pressed into every facet of life by the Regime, Lira bore a spirit not easily dulled. She lived with her mother and younger brother, Damian, in a modest apartment block, their existence hemmed in by curfews, surveillance drones, and the silent threat of being noticed for the wrong reason. Each day was a negotiation—a dance between visibility and safety, hope and resignation.

The city itself was a maze of high walls, watchtowers, and narrow corridors patrolled by faceless Enforcers whose eyes were hidden behind reflective visors. Here, difference equaled danger. Dissent was more than forbidden; it was erased. Resistance once flickered in the darkness, snuffed out in brutal purges that served as both punishment and spectacle. No one escaped the Regime's scrutiny for long. And yet, Lira's restless dreams refused to quiet, spurred on by the small acts of rebellion she witnessed in her mother's gentle courage and Damian's subtle acts of defiance.

Every day, Lira watched the sky as if its relentless, bleeding color might someday shift, might reveal something brighter beyond the clouds. It was on one such morning, squarely beneath that oppressive hue, that her world fractured. The Regime's armored hands swept through their district, and her brother was taken without explanation—plucked from the thin shield of family and routine and hidden away in a labyrinthine system designed to break the will. In the shadow of this loss, Lira's dormant resolve ignited, thrusting her, unwilling but unyielding, into the heart of darkness she'd only ever glimpsed at the city's edges.

Thus begins a collision of worlds: the suffocating order of The Dominion, and the hidden pulse of rebellion beating quietly beneath its streets—a world of secret codes, clandestine meetings, and dangerous hope. It is here, among the resistance, that Lira will confront not only the Regime's brutality but her own capacity for bravery, forgiveness, and love. With every risk taken and every secret uncovered, the line between friend and enemy will blur, and the true price of hope will be revealed.

The crimson sky hangs heavy over all, yet underneath it, seeds of defiance take root. From the ashes of captivity rises the possibility of freedom—a possibility born in sacrifice, nurtured by trust, and shaped by a love that, though forbidden, may prove resilient enough to cast its own light across the horizon. In the end, it is not just the world that must change, but Lira herself, if there is to be any hope at all under a crimson sky.

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CHAPTER ONE: Beneath the Crimson Veil

The siren's shriek was a familiar punctuation mark to the dawn, tearing through the thin walls of their apartment like a physical rend. Lira stirred, the taste of dry air and a vague anxiety already clinging to her tongue. She rolled onto her back, her gaze automatically drifting to the single, grimy window. Beyond it, the sky bled a relentless crimson, a hue that seemed to deepen with each passing year, pressing down on The Dominion like a suffocating blanket. It was a color that had steeped into the very fabric of their lives, reflecting in the polished surfaces of the Enforcers' helmets, glinting off the metal of the drones that hummed perpetually overhead.

She slipped out of her narrow cot, the cold floor biting at her bare feet. Her younger brother, Damian, was still asleep, a tangled mess of limbs beneath a threadbare blanket on the cot opposite hers. He was thirteen, all sharp angles and restless energy, and sometimes Lira felt the weight of the world pressing down on her just thinking about the future they faced. Their mother, Elara, was already up, the faint clatter of metal on their tiny stove signaling her preparation of the morning rations.

Lira pulled on her standard-issue grey tunic and trousers, the coarse fabric scratching against her skin. Every citizen wore the same uniform, a deliberate obliteration of individuality that Lira sometimes yearned to tear off and burn. Even her hair, long and dark, was supposed to be pulled back into a severe knot, though she often left a few rebellious strands escaping. Today, she pulled it back tightly, a silent nod to the day's inherent dangers. The siren's shriek had subsided, leaving an unnerving silence in its wake, the kind that often preceded an unscheduled sweep.

"Morning, Lira," her mother said, her voice soft, a welcome counterpoint to the city's harshness. Elara, despite the weariness etched around her eyes, moved with a quiet dignity, her silvered hair pulled back in a neat bun. She portioned out their nutrient paste and a small cup of recycled water. "Eat quickly. The patrol routes seem... different this morning."

Lira nodded, picking up her spoon. The nutrient paste was bland, tasteless, designed for sustenance, not pleasure. She forced herself to swallow it down, her eyes darting towards Damian. He was stirring now, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His gaze, even in the haze of waking, held a spark, a curiosity that Lira worried about constantly. He asked too many questions, saw too much. It was a dangerous trait in The Dominion.

"Any reports?" Damian mumbled, his voice thick with sleep, but already the quick intelligence behind his eyes was waking. He was always hungry for information, for anything that might break the monotony.

Their mother gave him a stern look. “No reports. Just eat.”

But Lira knew what Damian meant. The city had its own unspoken language—a shift in the hum of the power conduits, a change in the frequency of drone patrols, a sudden silence in the normally bustling market district. Today, the silence felt ominous. It wasn’t the quiet of a peaceful morning; it was the hush before a storm.

Lira finished her paste, the metallic tang lingering. “I’m heading out to the Requisition Center today,” she said, looking at her mother. “We’re low on water filters.”

Elara’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure that’s wise? Given the... atmosphere?”

Lira shrugged, feigning a nonchalance she didn’t feel. “It’s necessary. And besides, staying cooped up only makes the walls feel closer.” She was one of the few permitted to venture beyond their sector, thanks to her designation as a “Resource Analyst”—a fancy title for someone who cataloged, requested, and distributed the meager supplies allotted to their district. It was a soul-numbing job, but it provided a measure of freedom, a way to observe, to exist outside the direct gaze of their residential sector’s surveillance.

As Lira prepared to leave, the distinct thud of heavy boots echoed from the corridor outside their apartment. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Too early. Too many.

Elara’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with fear. Damian, who had been about to take a bite of his paste, froze, his spoon clattering to the floor. The sound seemed to reverberate in the sudden, dreadful silence that filled their small home.

The pounding on their door was deafening, a percussive assault that shook the entire frame. “Open up! Regime inspection!” a voice boomed, amplified by an external speaker.

Lira’s breath hitched. Inspection? They never had unscheduled inspections. Not without cause. Her gaze locked with her mother’s, and she saw the same terrifying question reflected there: *Why us?*

“Stay behind me,” Elara whispered, pushing Lira and Damian gently back. She moved towards the door, her hand trembling as she reached for the locking mechanism.

Before she could unlatch it, the door splintered inward with a violent crash. Three Enforcers in their dark, featureless armor spilled into the room, their weapons raised, their reflective visors mirroring the crimson light from the window. The air crackled with a cold, impersonal menace.

“Lira Solis, Elara Solis, Damian Solis,” one of them droned, his voice devoid of inflection. He held a data slate, his thumb gliding across its surface. “We have received information concerning subversive activities within this residential unit.”

Lira scoffed, a reckless surge of anger overriding her fear. “Subversive activities? We follow every protocol. We exist.”

The Enforcer ignored her, his gaze sweeping over the cramped apartment, lingering on Damian. Damian, eyes wide with terror, clutched at his mother’s tunic. Lira’s blood ran cold. *No. Not him.*

“Damian Solis,” the Enforcer continued, his voice sharper now, “you are to come with us for questioning. Information has been received that you have been accessing unauthorized data streams.”

Lira felt as if the air had been sucked from the room. Unauthorized data streams? Damian was always tinkering, trying to bypass the Regime’s filters on the communal data terminals, but it was just harmless curiosity, an attempt to find old music files, forgotten stories. Nothing that warranted this. Nothing that warranted *this*.

“He’s just a boy!” Elara cried, stepping forward, her voice laced with desperation. “He doesn’t know anything! He’s done nothing wrong!”

The Enforcer raised a hand, a gesture of dismissive authority. “That is for the interrogation center to decide. Compliance is mandatory.” Two other Enforcers moved forward, their gloved hands reaching for Damian.

Lira reacted without thinking, her body moving on instinct. She launched herself forward, placing herself between Damian and the advancing Enforcers. “You can’t take him! He’s done nothing! Take me instead!”

A sharp, painful jolt coursed through her arm as one of the Enforcers activated a stun baton. The pain was immediate, electrifying, stealing her breath. Her muscles seized, and she crumpled to the floor, dimly aware of her mother’s scream, Damian’s terrified cry.

Through the haze of pain, she saw them dragging Damian away, his small body struggling against their grip. He looked back at her, his eyes wide, pleading, filled with a fear that tore at her heart. “Lira! Mom!”

“Damian! No!” Elara lunged forward, but another Enforcer roughly pushed her back, sending her sprawling.

The last thing Lira saw before the door slammed shut, cutting off her brother’s fading

cries, was the empty space where he had been. The crimson light from the window seemed to mock her, painting the scene in hues of despair. Her arm still throbbed, but the pain was nothing compared to the gnawing emptiness in her chest. Damian was gone. And The Dominion had just shown her how fragile their lives truly were. The oppressive silence returned, broken only by Elara's heartbroken sobs. Lira lay on the cold floor, staring at the splintered door, a terrifying, silent promise forming in her mind: she would get him back. No matter the cost.

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