



The sunset's rays of fire bathed his rebellious, blonde curls, making them look like copper. It was as if his entire angelic face was framed in lines of fire and gold. *His appearance often led me to think of God or angels.* All he needed now was just shining armor and a strong sword. You could swear that Gabriel himself came down from Heaven to march toward sundown on a dusty street of the eternal Terra. *The fiery-haired boy looked exactly like I was remembering him to be.*

A short smile, genuine but too shy to be shared with others, spread on the girl's discolored face. Her small, white hands clenched tightly against the cold marble block. If she climbed too high, she risked being seen, if she leaned too low, she would have lost her balance and fallen from a threatening height. Looking beyond the large white Wall was strictly forbidden, but the temptation was too great. How could she not look when she knew clearly that *He* would be there? That all of them would be, in fact.

They looked exactly like she thought they would. Maybe even more beautiful and colorful than they were in her memories from a month ago. They were all tall, with graceful, supple, and straight bodies, with perfectly drawn lines and curves as if they had been designed by Michelangelo himself. Their hair shone in various stunning colors, which were more or less bright or charming, from dark, vivid red to pale gold and bluish-black nuances.

Healthy, rich strands fell like a rare silk ornament on the girls' royal heads. She had never thought that hair could be so beautiful and sublime as a poem meant to glorify the tenderness and light of their face. Her fingers twitched at the urge to plunge into one of those magnificent strands of hair. She wanted to feel their natural perfection with her own hands. She wanted to reach out to them ...

The skinny girl tried her best to get up a little closer so she could look at their faces better. Her rough, thin hands closed on the cold, dirty edge of the Wall. Her jaw tightened fast from exertion. The big, heavy boots hung down on her feet like two iron boulders, turning climbing of any kind into a real ordeal. She had no mobility or accuracy, everything was done by

groping and by the brute force of tired hands. The large, loose, faded clothes were lightly shaken by the cool evening breeze. One or two patches of different colors adorned her long, gray dress that fluttered slowly in the wind. The cold had reached her bones.

A little more, a little more ... the skinny girl carefully raised the top of her head and her small, thin nose leaned against the sharp edges of the marmour. She had a few seconds to watch. Just a few seconds, like every time she went there. Her face suddenly brightened. Now she could see them all walking in the splendor of the setting sun.

Their faces best reflected the perfection of the Kingdom of God. Once you started watching, you couldn't stop staring. Each new face had its own mastery, its own story, and grandeur, you needed at least five minutes for each ... but she didn't have five minutes anymore, not even one minute. Her big chocolate eyes searched desperately for his face and the second they found him, they became slightly filled in the warmth of pure happiness. She was still remembering the first time she had seen him. How could she forget? With his soft smile, like an unmistakable signature of his refined personality, with red lips, full of promises, with dark and deep blue eyes, with a porcelain face adorned with dimples in his rosy cheeks. So many times in the night she could feel the sublime song of his laughter, whispering tenderly in her dreams. For her, it was always like the first time. Every time she saw him, felt like it was the first time.

He was smiling even at that moment too. He was always smiling. A crooked, dreamy smile spread timidly across the girl's freckled face. She imagined that his smile was for her. How beautiful would have been for the angel with fiery hair to smile at her like that! The thin girl let a faint giggle slip through her lips but froze almost instantly. Everything came to an end. Her reveries were dissipated quickly. She made a mistake. What if she was discovered? Her hands began to sweat uncontrollably and the marmour became more and more slippery.

Her breathing became rushed suddenly. Her minutes had passed much faster than expected. An orange-haired girl looked blankly at the fence. A short thud sounded muffled in the distance, but no one paid attention. The procession saw its way, each stepping in a predetermined order.

Beyond the large marble wall, the discolored girl shook her clothes full of dust and straw. The hip of her right leg, which she had fallen on, hurt terribly. *There will be a beautiful bruise,*

she thought sullenly. Her face twisted into a grimace of pain and exasperation as she began to massage it lightly. An arm was lightly bruised, and now she was going to limp home. *What a day to be alive...* How was she going to explain all of that?

— That's what you get if you break the rules ... whispered she through her clenched teeth. The orange girl had turned too abruptly and the fear of falling was overshadowed by the fear of being discovered. She couldn't let herself be discovered.

She had to stop all this sneaking. She would soon get into trouble and she didn't want to put her family in danger. It would have been unbearable ... yes, she had to stop!

A shadow followed by a short noise of broken straw caught the girl's attention, making her tremble painfully. With wide, frightened eyes, she quickly turned to the noise.

— Who is there? Who is it? shouted the girl with broken, hurried voice — no answer

An icy silence had settled over the warm atmosphere of earlier times. The sun was gone, too, and the darkness had taken the place of the old heat. It was so quiet that she could clearly hear even the beating of her troubled heart. Oh, no, what if she was seen climbing the Wall? No, that was impossible. She was always careful, she had always taken all the measures ... and there was no patrol in the area at that specific time. People didn't come there anyway ... because it was forbidden ... and ... and ... still ... it's like she felt...

She had to get out of there. She couldn't risk being seen. She couldn't let herself be caught on the wrong foot. That could turn into a real disaster ... and would be all her fault. She had to get home to her four younger siblings. She had to feed them and prepare them for The Closing ... yes, that's what she had to do. From now on she will not allow herself to dream. It was the last time, definitely the last time. Her heart was pounding fast and she felt her body tremble slightly. The cold seemed harsher than usual ... this time she felt defeated. Defeated and dirty. She would have started to cry but she knew that tears would not help her, tears and regrets never saved anyone. What if she was seen?

— Help me, Lord, help me Lord ...her warm, endlessly soft whispers met the cold evening air. Her eyes narrowed painfully at the sudden memory of the boy's warm smile at sunset. She could no longer remember. She didn't have that luxury. She will erase all the memories.

She shook her head violently in an attempt to get rid of the ghost that didn't give her peace. This ghost never gave her peace, it was a cursed memory that had been confusing her for years and had pushed her to do the craziest things. *What a cursed fate!*

From now on, she would follow all the rules, only to get away with it this time. She only needed to escape this time ... and then ...

The heartbeat gradually began to subside at the sight of the imposing, gray building with hundreds of small, narrow windows. Flickering, familiar lights flashed through some of them. In front of the building were small figures who stopped abruptly from what they were doing to look at the newcomer in amazement.

— Irina, you're back! said a cheerful, hoarse voice of a child. Then three small, energetic figures rushed at her with all their might.

— I'm always coming back. You know it.



The room was not extraordinarily large, but couldn't be called small either. Somewhere in the corner, a pot of soup was boiling and four candles were flickering on the table. Electricity was a precious and expensive thing, they only had it for four days a week. It took a lot of energy to keep a huge city standing, plus a few more villages. Irina approached the small window of their apartment hesitantly. In the distance, an oasis of light shone blue in the endless darkness. Only three things were visible outside at night: the moon, the stars, and the city. The city shone like a real galaxy, a cosmic wonder right after sunset. Only in the dark one could see the true shades, which were hidden during the day. The tall and majestic buildings rose elegantly to the sky as if the whole city had raised its arms to God. Irina could only see the tops of the taller buildings and the unmistakable blue light. The rest was hidden behind the white marble wall. Who knows how many other miracles lingered in Tomis, the city of a thousand lakes.

— What are you looking at?

Her brother's harsh, suspicious voice pulled her out quickly of her dreaming. Ever since she confessed to him, he turned into an unbearable being. He was always watching her, if he

could, he would have entered her mind ten times per day. Irina was starting to get tired of it. She frowned at her younger brother.

He's tall, slender figure leaned slightly over the soup pot. A large wooden spoon patiently swirled the viscous liquid. His eagle eyes, however, pierced Irina and not the soup in the pot.

— I'm fine, Dima, said Irina irritated, and turned her back on her brother, who raised his eyebrows arrogantly. He took the wooden spoon out of the pot and dropped it noisily into the sink. His eyes sparkled as if they were fueled by black lightning.

— Irina, did you ...

— Ina, how was at the farm today? How is the baby horse?

The tirade that was about to start was interrupted by the small, thin voice of little Liov. In his chubby hands sat a half-eaten red apple. Dima frowned at him. He didn't like being interrupted. He made no exceptions for three-year-olds either.

— Liov, you know it's not nice to interrupt other people's talking. And the horse's baby is called a foal, you had the animal lesson last week. Father Dumitru would be quite disappointed ...

— Leave him alone, he's still a baby, said Irina in exasperation while she was putting Liov on her knees. He smiled sweetly as Irina placed him in her arms, then he wrapped his small, fat hands around her neck. The apple fell to the ground and rolled under the bed. Ilari looked after him regretfully for a few seconds, but then rushed under the bed.

Irina's hands caressed the naughty little man's head tenderly.

— I saw the foal today. It's healthy and likes to fly and jump over the fences. He gives the caregiver a lot of trouble, said Irina, smiling warmly. Liov looked at her with his big blue dreamy eyes. He wanted to see the foal, too.

— Ilari, why are you under the bed?! Get out of there immediately! Damn that apple, I'll give you another one! Get your clothes dirty with dust and I swear you'll wash them yourself this time! shouted Dima threateningly, then he began to pull Ilari by his legs, but he didn't want to get out.

— You foolish rat, get out!

— Ouch, Dima! You hit me with your elbow! shouted Irina angrily and gave her brother an ugly look. Liov began to laugh and flinch.

— Can't you just move to another place?! Don't you see that I'm doing something here? shouted Dima back, looking at his sister with the same ugly look that she threw at him earlier. Ilari clenched his hands to the bed's legs. The carpet that was under him kept coming out as Dima was pulling his legs but the apple, unfortunately, ended up even further under the bed. *Damn, it* whispered the stubborn boy with exasperation.

— You're doing a big shit! That little I can see too. Look at what you've done to the carpet!

— I've told you so many times to be careful with your language in front of small children! I swear you're a dead man, Ilari!

— Nothing is wasted in this house! shouted Ilari proudly from under the bed

— Hah! Irina snapped, unable to help herself. An ironic, satisfied smile spread across her face. Defeated by his own rules!

— Shut up, woman! shouted Dima with red cheeks and pulled even harder on Ilari's feet

— Shut up all of you !!! burst Marina out of all her lungs.

The apocalyptic commotion stopped abruptly and all eyes were fixed on the frowning girl with curly blond hair. Her usually serene and benevolent face wore now a frown of parental rebuke. She put the book in her hand on the floor and placed her hands on the hips as a real mother would do.

— What would mom and dad say if they saw us like that? They rely on us to do our best in their absence. So stop being so annoying and loud ! said Marina, screaming the last words in her high-pitch voice but with an unusual authority. Then she picked up her book again and sat back in her corner of the window.

— For a six-year-old girl, she's quite the authority here, said Dima in a weak whisper, as if to not be heard by Marina's skilled ears.

— And even more mature than other authorities in this house, replied Irina, frowning at Dima

Ilari managed to find the half-eaten apple and quickly tucked it into his trouser's pocket. Then he crawled on his stomach carefully without Dima noticing anything. In a matter of seconds, Ilari was gone and enjoying his little victory. Dima was too busy looking ugly at his older sister to notice that Ilari was no longer under the bed.

— You're the biggest here! You have turned 21 and the Distribution will take place soon! You should be the head of the family and mix in that pot of damn soup! But you are too busy climbing walls! You went again, didn't you? asked Dima hastily with red cheeks and daring eyes.

Irina stood up and looked offended at her brother. She couldn't believe how big of a mouth he had. She felt the need to hit someone or something. Marina pulled her nose out of the book and studied her older sister with interest.

— Did you climb the Wall? asked she bored, as if they were not speaking of something forbidden

— No! answered Dima and Irina simultaneously

— Forget about it, Marina! You can never talk to anyone about the Wall, understood? said Dima harshly without looking at her. Then he grabbed Irina by the hand and pulled her to their parents' room. The old wooden door slammed loudly behind them.

Ilari pulled his head out of his hiding slowly and grinned. His clothes were dusty and he got a few scratches, but all the effort was well worth it. He brushed off his light brown hair with his hand. He got a fat apple in his pocket and an angry Dima. That meant one thing: freedom

Dima was no longer so attentive to what was going on around him when he was angry. Now he had a free pass to fly out of the sight of his older and annoying brother. Ilari tiptoed a few steps to the door and pressed the doorknob gracefully ...

— Me too, me too! shouted Liov cheerfully, then rose from the ground and came to Ilari, smiling wide. Marina laughed and looked ironically at her disappointed brother who seemed to be thinking about something intensely. Ilari stuck his tongue out despite her, then opened the door and flashed out of the apartment.

Liov remained frozen in front of the door. His tiny mouth was wide open in disbelief, his eyes became tearing, and an ugly frown rose on his chubby face. He turned slowly, facing Marina's eyes, and began to cry uncontrollably. The latter sighed loudly and ran her hand through her hair in exasperation. Ilari was delusional if he thought that she would cover him every time he snuck out of the house.

— Let me read to you about horses, Liov! We'll see pictures too, stop crying, okay?

∞

Dima closed the door behind him angrily, then turned quickly to Irina, who was looking at him arrogantly, ready to defend herself no matter what. She refused to be controlled by her younger brother. Who was he thinking to be by ordering her around, telling her all the time what to do or what to not?! As if he was the head of the house! Irina, however, could understand the source of his worries and why he was acting the way he was, but that didn't mean it didn't irritate her. His restrictive and conservative attitude annoyed her like hell. He was never listening to what she had to say! Every time she tried to shed her soul or talk about her feelings, Dima jumped on her like a jackal with all sorts of accusations and morals. She had given up trying to talk to him rationally, like two adults. What was the point if he never tried to understand her? At least he could pretend a little for her sake ...

— How many times do I have to tell you the same thing until it hits your head? We are the adults in the family, we are the example for our younger siblings! Do you really want us to be kicked out of the house? And for what?! For a stupid—

— It was the last time! said Irina with tears in her eyes, stopping her brother's angry tirade. I know the risks. I will never do that again. I promise!

— You always say that! I won't do it again, I won't do it again but you always go back there! It's like that damn wall cast a spell on you! Are you sure you weren't cursed? Maybe if I talk to dad...

— I'm not cursed, Dima. There is no spell, just stupidity. My dreamy stupidity. I don't want to get in trouble, I'm serious. I will not return there, said Irina firmly, feeling her heart quicken at the memory of the shadow she had seen. The irritation had been quickly replaced by a deceptive fear that was now bubbling through her veins. She turned her back to Dima.

The parents' room was small, welcoming, and simply furnished. At the window was a wooden double bed covered with clean, white sheets. A large closet, sculpted with beautiful ornaments, occupied almost the entire left wall, and next to the bed was a chic dressing table with a shiny, round mirror. A few hairpins and mother's perfumes were lined up on the table. *Mom...* Irina missed her parents very much. They were supposed to be there with her on the day of the Distribution. They had to be with her when she was making the most important decision of her life! Already eight months passed since they left and they were supposed to be gone only three months. Three months was reasonable but eight ... They weren't ready to handle themselves that much! She remembered that day perfectly. The day they left.

They all promised to stay out of trouble and to take care of Liov. Their parents, in turn, promised to return soon. But they didn't return soon and every time they manage to catch them on the phone, they would always say the same thing: that they have to stay just a little, a little more and after that, they will come home quickly. They said that every single time. Irina clenched her fists until they were completely white. She wanted to cry. She no longer wanted letters and phone calls, she wanted to see her mother.

Dima touched her lightly on the shoulder and she turned her face to him. His dark chocolate eyes looked at her worriedly. His anger had instantly evaporated at the sight of his sister's vulnerability.

— Are you ok? whispered Dima

— No, I'm not! I miss my mother! It's hard without them here ... nothing is the same. Why did they have to be summoned! We are workers of the earth, not of the wood! That's not right, she replied with a sigh, avoiding Dima's worried eyes

— You know that sometimes the sectors get mixed up, that's why we learn at school to do the work of all the sectors. It's never known when you will be summoned. Unlike others, our parents were never summoned, it was expected that one day —

— But they were sent thousands of miles away! In the Dead Forest! No one has ever been sent this far! Not from our village! We grow vegetables and animals, we do not deal with the wood industry. It's not right! answered Irina fiercely, feeling her lower lip tremble. She knew she was going to cry. All this time she had repressed all her resentments and worries about the absence of their parents. They were all about to erupt out of her as an angry volcano.

Dima hugged her with his long arms and rested her head on his shoulder. Irina's chest moved rhythmically up and down, and nothing could be heard in the room but hurried breathings and sobs.

— I miss them too, whispered Dima defeated, then hugged his sister tighter.

Irina detached herself hesitantly from Dima's arms and sat down on the bed. Her chestnut hair covered her pale face like a shadow meant to hide her deepest weakness.

— Sorry. I mean it. I promise that ...

— What do they look like?

Irina suddenly raised her head from the ground and looked at her brother in bewilderment. She thought at first that she might hear him wrong.

— What? she replied visibly confused

— The Crystal People. You saw them, didn't you? said Dima, whispering conspiratorially as if they could be heard by someone. An unbridled curiosity could be read in his eyes, along with some embarrassment. He felt uncomfortable asking such a thing, but he couldn't help himself. His sister had seen the Crystal People!

— They're beautiful, she said uncertainly. She didn't know how to deal with this new Dima, curious and willing to talk about forbidden things. They are exactly as they were described to us by the priests. They embody the perfection of God's creation. They are all tall, gracious, and proud, they have clean and bright skin, rich and healthy hair, and their faces are angelic. You can

swear they are real angels. There's a boy who looks exactly like the angel Gabriel ... I mean, I don't know what the angel looks like, but if he were to look a certain way, he would look like him. His hair in the sunset sun looks like the Divine Fire! They are so beautiful when...

— But can they really jump up to two meters and crush a skull with their bare hands?

Dima interrupted her with his eyes widened by pure fascination.

Irina was brutally torn from her dream of her fiery-haired angel, and she frowned in displeasure.

— How do you want me to know that ?! I barely managed to look at them for a few seconds! They walked along the Wall twice, that's all. Are you out of your mind, where did you get that nonsense?

— Everyone knows about that nonsense, said Dima irritated. We all know they are powerful and scary!

— Why would they crush skulls and jump like kangaroos? It's stupidity! Nobody said anything about that! shouted Irina, angered by her brother's ignorance

—They're better than us! More beautiful, smarter, healthier, stronger, more ... anything! Of course, they do creepy things. Get your romantic stories with knights and Gabriels with fiery hair out of your head! There is no such thing.

— Excuse me ?! Irina jumped out of the bed. She couldn't believe her brother's impertinence. He trivialized the whole story and made it look like a cheesy romance book for silly girls.

The room door slammed open and a blond, bored head popped out of the door.

— Sorry to interrupt your extremely important meeting about the knights, but Ilari is wandering outside right now.

Dima's eyes grew wide open in disbelief. He looked alert at Irina. She would have gladly taken a smack in the head with a frying pan than go out with a mad Dima in search of their not-so-smart younger brother.



— But it is not fair!

Ilari shouted with indignation, then looked pleadingly at his more understanding sister, Irina.

She looked back at him passively with her hands folded across her chest. This time he was in big trouble. He had to be punished. Not because he slipped out after the Closing, but because he was caught so easily by them. How could someone be so stupid as to get caught so soon? What if he was discovered by a patrol? Her freckled, ruffled brother had to learn to be, well ... smarter.

— I don't even want to hear! What if the night patrol caught you? We would all be in trouble now!

Dima glared at the frowning boy. He stood straight like a well-trained soldier, his hands were threateningly placed on his hips, giving him a more imposing position in front of his younger brother. With his stubbornness and natural determination, the young teenager was ready to mercilessly counter any possible "blows" of his disobedient brother. He will make sure that he won't escape that easily, he will even make him regret his stupid decision from that night. Boys like him could only be handled with a strong hand and an iron will. At first glance, you wouldn't say that there was anything special about Dima. With his usual and somewhat faded appearance, Dima was always able to get lost in the crowd without any problems. He was neither ugly nor handsome, he had nothing special in the construction of his face or body posture. He was just a boy from the earth sector: He was tall and slender, his light chestnut hair covered his smooth forehead, his eyes were brown and round, his nose small, his mouth determined and his face looked like a harmless kid(maybe because of his gentle eyes and the few freckles scattered on the cheekbones). But one thing was certain: to underestimate Dima, judging him by his appearance could be the stupidest mistake anyone could ever make. He was not a harmless child either. Rather a wolf dressed in sheepskin. The combination of his strong, authoritarian personality and his harmless, childish appearance made him really scary in Ilari's eyes.

Unfortunately, only those close to him knew the true character of the teenager. Ilari sighed loudly. He wanted to punch himself in the jaw. All the boys in the village said he was

very lucky to have an older brother like Dima. They all had the impression that there was no authority in their family now and he could do whatever he wanted. What a crap! Dima was the devil in person and no one believed him! Or at least that's how he looked like at that moment, with that ugly grimace on his face, the stiff position of his body, and the vein on his forehead that was about to crack. *God help me*, whispered the scolded boy.

— That's all? Do you have something else to add? After you went out at night to ride a stupid donkey ?!

— But you go out to ride girls, so don't pretend to be the God of Respected Rules in front of me! Hypocrite! shouted Ilari back, looking in disgust at his older brother as if kissing girls secretly was a terrible thing to do.

In the next second, Dima's eyes widened in astonishment, and both cheeks, with the ears too, were colored in a bright shade of red. It seemed like this wasn't a fair fight. The bastard Ilari had attacked him from behind. Dima felt like he was instantly ripped off of his military ranks with authority. He hunched a little, then glared at Irina, who looked exactly as he thought she would.

— I'm nineteen! I can do whatever I want, so don't look at me like that anymore! You're only twelve, and donkeys riding is strictly forbidden! You are punished! You don't get dessert for three days and you can say goodbye to the damn donkey because you won't see it again! shouted Dima breathlessly, with all the authority he could muster after Ilari's unfair blow.

Ilari adopted a bored face, shrugged, and completely ignored his two siblings. Irina had been there only to watch how his ass was beaten. He would remember that in the future. He looked for a few seconds at his older and treacherous sister, then turned his back on the two of them. He wanted to leave the room by slamming the door melodramatically behind him, but he was punished and had nowhere to go.

— Are you done with the mess? asked Marina, bored, from behind the door to their parent's bedroom. To her right side was Liov pulling on her dress. At first sight, Marina looked like a good and bored little girl, but her siblings knew better: she was about to explode. It seemed like Liov had given her some trouble. Most of the time he was a cute and cheerful toddler, but sometimes he was too cheerful.



In the summer, the nights had always been mercilessly warm. Almost none of the siblings closed their eyes during the night and now all five had long, grim faces. Irina strode toward her two younger brothers and took Liov in her arms, then kissed him noisily on his puffy cheeks.

— Let me read you a story, Liov! said Irina, looking playfully at the little boy in her arms. The latter had begun to rejoice and shake hands happily.

— Ilari can read it to him. The two of us have to go to the market.

— Both of us? Why both? asked Irina, visibly confused.

— You'll have the Distribution Celebration in a few days and you need to buy yourself a new dress, said Dima casually as he put on his shoes.

Irina put Liov down and looked at her brother with wide eyes. She wasn't able to say anything. A dress? For her?

— What are you looking at? Let's go already! We have another thing to do besides this today.

— But we don't have any money for a dress, replied Irina in a low, stammering voice, as if she couldn't understand anything of what was going on around her.

— I put aside some. Did you think that I'd let you go to the Celebration in one of your old ugly dresses! Put on your shoes and let's go! We can't leave these three alone for too long. Marina, you're the boss until I get back, okay?

— Yes, sir! said Marina, imitating a military salute with the most serious face she could make.

— What the heck?! Ilari jumped out of the bed. He stared blankly at Dima and then at Marina, who looked at him with an ironic grin full of promises. But I'm the biggest here! Why is Marina the boss ?!

— Because I'm the smartest here, unfortunately. Now shut up and read a story to Liov, ordered Marina with her usual bored face.

— Aaaahhh, it's not right! Ilari complained, kicking the sofa and cursing his siblings in his mind. He still wasn't sure who was scarier: Dima, the King of Rules, or Marina, who was actually a grumpy grandmother in the body of a six-year-old girl. He was waiting for Liov to grow up a little and make him his ally. He had just to wait a little more...

Every Tuesday, there was a big market in the village. Everyone came: merchants, craftsmen, repairmen, and all kinds of street vendors. Anyone could sell something, there were no rules. Normally, mundane people were not allowed to own things in this world. Everything belonged to Heaven. It was useless to own something since you couldn't take anything with you after death.

One came with nothing and you left with nothing. The possibility of possessing something would have tempted the human soul to commit many sins, it was the best for everyone to be equal and to have nothing. Money and wealth were the dirtiest temptations for people's souls. At least, that is what the holy priests always preached. They were the ones who possessed all the knowledge and wisdom of the world. They controlled all the libraries and they were the ones in charge of educating the younger generations. Irina has always considered it a big hassle to be a priest. To be so dignified, solemn, and mature all the time ... with all that wisdom and words of wisdom ... bleah! Too much wisdom! She would have been terribly bored! She could become terribly bored if she ever married a priest. That's why she had to avoid George at all costs. That boy never gave her peace, he would always cut her path and ruin her mood. She was tired of all those boring, witty conversations she had with him.

Irina looked conspiratorially to the left and right, looking after that reddish head covered by an ugly flat hat. Maybe in all the crowds in the market, and with the cloak pulled over her head, George won't recognize her. God, what if she ran into him ?! She was with Dima, so she wasn't able to hide or run off. She would be forced to exchange politeness with him and maybe start a little conversation. But, God, she could swear that she was capable of strangling him if she had to endure another conversation on the topic of women's duties. When you think about it, she was pretty excited at first with all that attention and gallantry that she received from him. She thought that as a scholar- priest, George was going to be a very interesting person, that he would teach her many new things, and that he might even take her to the Earth Lotus library. She was

wrong. She had come across a real loser that was probably no smarter than the hat he always wore. Irina stumbled by mistake and collided with her brother's stiff back.

— What are you doing behind me? he burst out irritated. You're going to step on my boots and break them. Again!

— Calm down, I'm not going to do anything! Said Irina calmly and emerged defeated from Dima's shadow

— Have you been to confession?

Irina pursed her lips but said nothing. Damn eagle! Nothing escapes him. Irina didn't go to confession. She wasn't able to wake up that morning so she missed confession. Of course, she couldn't tell Dima that it was like that ...

— I don't like to be forced to confess with all kinds of people around me ...

— They are people from the village, not prisoners.

— Stop interrupting me! I don't like to do it like an obligation. I'll do it when I feel ready! Answered Irina firmly, folding her arms across her chest.

— I think you feel like doing it tomorrow, said Dima through gritted teeth

— Are you an oracle or what? growled Irina in revolt

— You don't have to be an oracle to know when to do the right thing. Confessions are mandatory and you know it. So don't get on my nerves anymore and do the right thing!

— I wonder if there are mandatory confessions for Crystal People too, said Irina, still irritated by her brother's commanding attitude.

— Irina! Be careful what you say, we're in a public market, damn it! Someone can hear us! Because of you and the bratty Ilari, I will get white hair prematurely!

— No..., Irina rushed to defend herself, though no smarter reply came to her mind. Sometimes her brain just suddenly freezes.

— We've reached the seamstress. Let's go in and choose something right for you. Maybe someone will finally notice you and marry you. I can't wait to get rid of the problems that you always bring...

Irina froze when George's memory reached her mind. She would rather go to the Celebration in stables clothes than in a dress that George would greedily stare at.

Irina stared in the mirror for more than five minutes. She did pirouettes and kept pulling her dress left and right. She wanted to stay as long as possible in that dress. The dress was wonderful. More than she had ever dreamed of. It was strapless, elegant, and long to the ground. It had hundreds of flowers woven with colored threads and in addition, it highlighted her waist. For the first time in 21 years, she felt ... beautiful. It was as if her face didn't look as boring as it used to. All those bright colors made her brown eyes shine. She radiated with her whole being.

It was not a dress made by their old seamstress. It was brought from Tomis, that much could be easily seen from the intricate patterns of the dress and the bright colors, unusual for the mundane people. Someone must have donated it and miraculously got it into her hands. She couldn't help but think that a crystal woman had owned that dress and even worn it, and now she was dressed in that very dress. Had she worn it to a ball too ... or maybe to a special date with a boy, even one with fiery hair!

Irina chuckled. The vivid image of Gabriel from the Crystal City had involuntarily appeared in her mind. Her beautiful angel with copper hair. Would he notice her if she wore such a dress? Irina smiled shyly and did another pirouette, delighted with the way the dress widened as it spun. Then she stopped. No, he wouldn't notice her and never will.

— It looks like Grandma's flowery apron, said Dima grumpily. Maria, don't you have something better around here? Something that is not for old women?

— Hey! Irina turned in shock, unable to believe her ears. Her serene, dreamy face darkened into an ugly grimace. How can you say that it's for old women? Can't you see it's a Tomis dress?! A crystal woman wore it! A real one!

— An old crystal woman...

— Dima! I want this dress, end of the discussion! I don't understand why you are commenting, we are here to buy a dress for me, not for you! she said fiercely, emphasizing the last part.

— You only want to buy it because it was brought from Tomis, Heaven on Earth, and the home of perfection, said Dima angrily, looking with disgust at the dress.

— Not true! shouted Irina to defend herself

Their quarrel was abruptly interrupted by the door slamming against the wall. A tall figure slowly entered the store, covered from head to toe with a bloody red cloak. The intruder's face was half shielded by the wide hood of her cloak. An ironic smile rose from the intruder's full, reddish lips. They had high cheekbones and ivory skin. Irina was gaping at the tall person who just entered the room. Dima stared at the intruder with fixed and sharp eyes, his face was neutral as he was staring at them. The bloody cloak stepped forward. The sound of broken glass had shattered the intense silence in the room. Maria put her wrinkled hand to her mouth and stared in horror at the vase she had just broken. Then she took a few steps back horrified and clung to the wall.

— Get out, said the intruder, calmly but threatening at the same time. It looked like it was really a woman even though Irina had never seen such a tall woman.

No one moved a finger. Everyone stared at the mysterious woman who had stormed into the store as if the whole village belonged to her. She shrugged and turned slightly to one side.

— Very well then. Anyway, no one gives a damn about some irrelevant peasants, said the woman boredly and then threw a thin metal tube on the floor. In the next second, a heavy, stifling smoke began to fill the little tailor's room.

Dima shouted something unintelligible at Irina, then brutally grabbed her arm and pulled her out in a few seconds. Although they didn't inhale the smoke for more than a few moments, the two teenagers felt like their lungs had caught on fire, along with their airways and nostrils too. They coughed uncontrollably and wept as their faces gradually turned in an increasingly bright shade of red. They couldn't breathe. They felt like they were suffocating and their chests were burning inside. Irina fell to the ground. Her knees were shaking. A few passers-by stopped to watch the show. The whole tailor's shop was covered in white, poisonous smoke. Nobody

could get closer to that building without feeling like throwing up their lungs. An old woman with blue and gentle eyes hurried out of the bakery with a large cup full of water and handed it to the two siblings. A circle of curious people was around them as Dima began to feel better and opened his eyes wider. His blood was boiling with rage. He wanted to scream like a mad animal. How dare she ?! He got to his feet and turned to face Irina, who was trying to get up from the ground.

— Wait for me here, said Dima in a commanding, determined tone, then disappeared behind a building.

She couldn't have gone too far. He had to catch up with her at all costs. His nails ached painfully into his flesh as his hands clenched into fists. His eyes still ached. His lungs were still burning like hell. But there was something else that burned even harder inside him: anger. Anger in its purest form. That stranger had threatened his sister's life. That stranger had hurt Irina under his own eyes! He promised his parents to take care of his siblings, that he will not allow them to be hurt. If he was even a few seconds late, who knows what could have happened ...

He would catch the bloody red cloak and make her pay. Dima swore it.



Ilari walked nervously back and forth in his parents' old room. He always took refuge there when he needed to think. His freckled face twisted into a grimace of exasperation, then stopped abruptly and kicked the bed. He dipped his hands into his ruffled hair and began to roll on the bed instead. What could he do? He had to think of a solution but he hated to think. His head ached at the thought of it. This was for those like Dima, not for him. Ilari was a man of action, of adventure, his philosophy of life was: live the moment. But this chaotic and reckless way of living often got him into trouble, just like it did that time. But this one was much bigger and scarier, it was a problem with a big, wide mouth, full of sharp teeth, ready to grab him. What could he do?

Ilari stopped rolling and choose to do some breathing exercises instead. Maybe this way he'll be able to calm down a little. It didn't work. He felt like an idiot. Maybe he was one. Ilari threw himself into bed again with all his might and power. He sighed, then began to roll back and forth. He needed a little order in his mind: 1. He would rather go to Hell than tell Dima. Telling Dima will make his life miserable for sure. 2. He couldn't tell Irina. She was an airhead and almost as bratty as he was. Irina could quickly get herself caught, she was a shit liar. 3. Marina was too small but quite wise. 4. Liov didn't even count.

Mom and dad were the only wise solution. He wanted to talk to his father, but how? He couldn't tell about that in a letter, it would have been too risky. Letters could be checked at borders. He couldn't tell something on the phone, someone could hear or listen to their call. But he couldn't wait for them to return home. Damn, who knew when would they be back home! They were always telling them the same thing: they have to stay just a little more: a little more, a little more... little more my ass! Ilari didn't like being lured with sugary words. He needed them to be home ... they would know what to do at that moment. The boy pounded his fist on the pillow and then stood up and placed his head in his palms. He looked like a drunken beate little whimper, and he hated it.

— Why are you weird today?

The boy flinched and got out of bed so fast that he almost lost his balance. Marina looked at him frowning from behind the door. Her short hair with golden strands covered half of her face, giving her a mysterious and serious look. Surely, her sharp mind suspected something. She stared intently at her anxious brother as if she was trying to read his messy mind. Then she sighed and closed the door behind her.

— I put Liov to bed, so we can talk now freely. What did you do this time? asked Marina in a thin but quite authoritative voice for a child

— Nothing! Mind your own business! Ilari rushed forward, turned his back to Marina, and headed to the window. The reddish rays of the sunset elegantly pierced the glass surface and spread neatly on the simple wooden floor.

— Why does everyone in this family have to be so stubborn? Now is not the right time to be like this. Ilari, what did you do? asked Marina sharply, emphasizing every word in the last question.

She was pretty sure that Ilari got himself into big trouble this time. He was twice her age and all in vain. His six-year-old sister was twice as mature as he was.

— I told you! I really didn't do anything! replied Ilari in a slightly louder tone than usual, with a defensive look on his face.

Marina began to lose her temper. She was piercing her brother with cold, accusing eyes.

— Let's see what Dima thinks about that, hissed the little girl, then went to open the door

— Wait! I'm serious! I really didn't do anything! I didn't get in trouble ... intentionally. It happened ... well ... to see something that I wasn't supposed to see, said Ilari in an uncertain voice with his face turned to the ground. He couldn't face Marina.

— What? Ilari, tell me, what did you see? replied Marina hurriedly and took a few steps toward her brother. She tried to face him, but he refused to look her in the eyes. The boy was agitated.

— Well, I was coming home. I had just met up with Andrei and Bogdan and ...and I was walking past the Wall. Not right next to, you know, nearby, and there were four masked men and three ones dressed in long, dark cloaks. I stopped and hid behind some bushes. Those people started fighting. There were four against one, you should have seen, it was great! The guy in the dark cloak beat all those masked men alone. Then the cloak took all the beaten men off the ground, one by one, and threw them to the other side of The Wall. With his bare hands!

— What? And what happened next? I know there must be something more...

— The problem is ... well, I think he saw me. The cloak that beat them all passed in front of the street light and came towards me but he was called by the others and turned around. I ran away as fast as I could. I've never been more scared in my life ... I thought they would take me with them...

— Ilari, what the hell did you do? said Marina with a trembling voice while her eyes were wide open and frightened. She turned around for a second and exhaled loudly. After a few moments, she was back with a much more controlled look on her face. Did you see any faces, did you recognize anyone?

Ilari stood still a second to think again about it and then answered.

— Some were masked and the others were wrapped in long cloaks, plus it was really dark. I'm pretty sure the masked men were ordinary mundane. I figured out by the clothes they were wearing, it wasn't too hard to guess. I don't know what the hell were they doing there ...

— Something else? Any other important details? asked Marina agitated, staring at Ilari with her focused gaze

— The guy who beat four men alone had a dark-red cloak on. That's all I can say. Ilari shrugged and looked down at the ground. His face was sad and really tired.

— By any chance, did he see your face? asked the girl hoarsely

— I don't know, it was pretty dark ... I don't think so ...

Marina covered her face with her small white hands and sat down on the bed. Nothing was certain. They couldn't just wait and pray. Something had to be done.

— We'll tell Dima and Irina, then we'll call our parents tonight, concluded the little girl in a determined, authoritative voice that admitted no objections.

— But ...

— The discussion is over. You know I'm right. We might be in danger. Do you understand the seriousness of this matter, Ilari?

— Yes, I understand, said Ilari regrettably. Sorry.

— Keep your apologies for tonight, now come out with me.

— Why?

— Dima and Irina are late. Dima is never late. We will look for them, we will ask the neighbors, someone must know something.

Ilari nodded. Dima was never late. The boy's heart began to run wildly. Fear and guilt burned his chest. He wanted to open his mouth to say something, but he felt like his voice was weak and broken. He also felt like something was stinging him behind the eyes.

— What if...

— Take mother's knitted coat from the hanger. Soon, it's gonna be cold outside. Dima and Irina will be back. They always come back.

He felt as if someone was stabbing him in the right side of his chest and his breathing was becoming more and more hurtful. He was thinking that at one point his legs will gonna give up and he will fall on the ground like a bag of potatoes if he continued to run like that, but he didn't care. If he was to fall, Dima would get up and continue his pursuit without any hesitations. She couldn't have gone too far. Everything happened in a few moments. Now that he thought about it again, he didn't see anyone rushing to the front door except for him and Irina, of course. It meant that the seamstress and the bloody cloak found another way out. Most likely there was another door behind the store. She wore a long cloak that covered everything, she clearly didn't want to attract attention. But what she did there in the store ... attracted as much attention as possible. She couldn't go out through the front door and come face to face with all the curious eyes of the market. So, she must have gone out through a back door. And behind the tailor's shop is the laundry-house, some kiosks, and side alleys.

Dima turned around and started running on one of those narrow, muddy alleys. At that rate, he was going to reach the fish market in a few minutes. Dima tripped over a boulder and almost sprained his leg. He whispered some lovely words to all the creepy dark alleys and then continued his hurried pursuit. He came out of the alley and in front of him was the large iron gate of the fish market. It was locked and everything around it was deserted and dirty. Dima kicked a stone from the ground, then put his hands on his hips and looked to his right side. For a second he saw a red material fluttering behind the open gates. Dima clenched his jaw and rushed in that direction with all the strength he had left. In a few seconds, he caught up with the red figure and brutally pulled on their arm. A sharp, hoarse scream broke the heavy silence of the disty fish market. The middle-aged woman looked at Dima with wide, terrified eyes. She wore a thin, old cloak of faded red color. Her cloak didn't even compare to that of the intruder who had a royal bloody color. Dima let go of the woman's arm, who had immediately begun to run away as if her whole life depended on it. She even glanced back at him in horror several times.

On the ground was thrown a basket of twigs containing about six scattered fish. Most likely she came there to steal. Dima was not surprised in any way. Not even impressed nor

disappointed. The theft was a fairly common activity in their community. Everyone stole something at some point, and everyone kept their mouths shut. It was a taboo subject. Most of the food and materials were transported to the city, to the Crystal People. And they, the humans, could just wait and settle for the leftovers and crumbs that fell from the miserable tables of that crystal wretches.

— At Hell with all of you! screamed Dima with all the force he could muster. His echo could be heard endlessly repeated in the empty, gray horizon. The fog began to settle. Dima didn't remember to have screamed so loudly in his entire life. He couldn't remember feeling so defeated and useless also.

He had to go back to Irina and go home. He was quite late. Most likely Irina will gonna scream at him for leaving her alone in that crowd of strangers. And he won't say anything. He deserved it. Dima slipped into the narrow, dirty alley between the laundry-house and a tool shop. The ground was clayey and slippery, and the fog began to affect his eyesight pretty badly.

An iron-cold hand suddenly grabbed him and slammed him against the wall. It happened so quickly and unexpectedly that Dima was out of breath for a second. His heart was pounding fast and the adrenaline was boiling in his blood. The boy tried to liberate himself with all his might, but his revolt was brutally suppressed. He was completely immobilized and glued to that dirty, damp wall. His hands were twisted behind his back in a painful and dangerous position. If he moved just a little bit, he was risking breaking his wrists. The attacker pressed its elbow to the middle of his back, transforming his breathing into a real nightmare.

— Well, well what a little lion we have here. Don't tell me you were just going to go home like a defeated little kitten, won't you?. That would disappoint me deeply... whispered a woman's voice in a low, seductive tone that contained also a nuance of playful irony. Dima could feel the mischievous smile on her lips. In fact, he could feel much more. A slender, athletic body clinging to his. Her warm, regular breathing was tickling his left ear. Her lips touched the edge of his ear as they moved. Dima felt like his cheeks had begun to burn.

— Why? Why did you do it? asked Dima, with a strangled voice

— You wouldn't understand, mundane, replied the mysterious woman. Her warm lips touched his ear again. Dima lost his breath. His heart was pounding so hard that he felt like it was going to jump out of his chest. Could she hear it?

— You don't know what I can understand or not! I understand a lot more than you think. Now let go of me and show me your face if you have the courage! said Dima rather exasperated than angry, but he didn't know why. He couldn't tell why he wasn't angry anymore. His ears were ringing and his head was hurting.

The woman laughed lightly. Her chest rose rhythmically a few times and then stopped. She had a beautiful, thin, controlled laugh.

— What happened, dear? Is this the first time a woman has taken control of your body? asked the woman in her tempting voice and a much more playful tone than before. Dima was trembling. I would like to stay and play with you a little longer but I have work to do. See you soon, lion pup. The woman leaned closer and gently bit his earlobe. Slowly and madly. Dima could feel all that warmth and hardness. He could feel also fire in his chest. Then it was cold again and no weight pressed on his body. Dima fell to his knees and rested his head against the wall. He was breathing chaotically and hurriedly, his whole face was burning. He touched his left ear lightly with his hand. God, he had to do something with his heartbeat!



The big, red sun melted in the sea of rose clouds. All that was left was the light of a late afternoon and a brightly painted sky. The cold of the evening became more and more pronounced. People in gray colors were scattered around their homes after a long and tiring day of work. The closing shot went out at nine o'clock and everyone had to be home by then. If the night patrol caught anyone outside, whether they were adults or children, they would be sent, without further discussion, directly to solitary confinement. The family would also face sanctions. It was best to follow the rules and not ask questions. The questions were dangerous. In the last hour, several neighbors passed by the three children who were waiting quietly in front of the building. Some stared long at them before entering the building while others, more merciful

or curious by nature, stopped to ask if anything had happened. Each time they were greeted by a wave of the hand, smiling, and a lot of silence. Even Liov, who was quite talkative and restless, waited obediently with his two siblings. He was only three years old, but that didn't mean he couldn't notice the long, sad faces of his siblings or the tense atmosphere between them. They had been waiting for Dima and Irina for a long time, it seemed to Liov that eternity had already passed. Even the sun disappeared from the sky, and for a certain amount of time, no neighbor passed by them. There were no passers-by on the street and no sound except the hoarse barking of a lonely dog. It was quite cold.

— All right, I'll go after them, said Ilari determined, stepping forward. Marina quickly grabbed his elbow.

— It's almost eight-thirty. Now it's not possible to go to the market and come back in time, said the serious Marina. Ilari grinned.

— I'm a master of sneaking. Do you think this is the first time I've been out after sunset? I will go quickly to the market and return in no time, replied Ilari in the most optimistic tone possible. Or so he hoped it would sound.

— Ilari...

— Here they come, here they come! shouted Liov happily, pointing at two gloomy figures who were barely dragging their feet away. It was a boy and a girl. Marina couldn't tell their faces very well. Liov suddenly jerked away from her hands and ran towards the two faceless people. Both Marina and Ilari began to run quite alarmed, after their younger and naughty brother. The closer they got, the clearer the silhouettes became. It was really Dima and Irina. With their shoulders down and tired faces, they were walking slowly home.

— You're back! said Liov, and threw himself enthusiastically into Irina's arms. She immediately picked him up in her arms and kissed him lovingly on the cheek. Then she smiled briefly. Irina didn't look quite well. Her face was pale and tired.

Dima was walking absently. He was covered with mud and dust on his clothes. A serious frown was drawn on his face. He didn't even stop to greet Liov. Did he even notice him? Ilari doubted. Something happened. Something bad. The boy swallowed hard and looked at his

younger sister alarmed. The latter seemed just as alarmed as him. She glanced back at him sympathetically.

— What happened to you two? asked Ilari worried

Dima raised his head from the ground and looked around confused as if he had just woken up from a trance. Then his dark-brown eyes examined his two siblings with curiosity.

— What happened to you? Why are you out when it's about the time of closing?

— We were worried. You were late, replied Marina with sad eyes

— Let's go home, said Dima shortly, then turned his back on the two of them and walked faster. After him, came the rest of the children in silence. Something very bad happened, thought Ilari. He had probably been caught and would end up in solitary confinement. His heart began to race. He only hoped that his actions would not affect his siblings

Dima entered the house and went straight to the bathroom. Irina, on the other hand, sat on the bed with Liov in her arms. She wanted to take off her dress, but Dima went to the bathroom first, now she had to wait for a while. She had to be very careful with that dress since it was so valuable for her. Anyway, she hadn't paid for it ... and she wasn't going to do it after all that had happened.

— What is it? I can't stand all this tension anymore! shouted Ilari exasperated, shaking his hands dramatically. Irina frowned at him.

— We know you're hiding something from us. We don't need any stupid protection, so spit it all out. We never hide anything from each other. Not when something is important, intervened Marina with her serious and far too mature look for a child.

— It's nothing like that, I was going to tell you right away. You would have found out anyway, the whole market was just buzzing about it. Dima is a little more affected, though.

Marina and Ilari looked at each other in confusion. Liov looked as confused as his siblings, but then he remembered that Dima was carrying some bags, so he went cheerfully to the small kitchen to rummage through them.

— There was an incident at the tailor's shop. A strange woman, all covered in a long cloak, came in and threw toxic gas at us. We had barely escaped safely from there.

— Did she just come in and threw gas? asked Ilari, puzzled.

— No. At first, she asked us to get out but no one moved. That woman just burst into the tailor's shop and then started throwing orders. It all happened so fast that we didn't even have time to think too much! In the next moment, I was outside thinking I was going to throw up my lungs. Dima went after her but I don't think he found her. He didn't talk to me at all after that, said Irina worried

— What color was the cloak, do you remember? asked Marina with serious eyes and Ilari winced

— I don't think I'll ever forget that cloak. It's one of the most beautiful cloaks I've ever seen. That color will gonna haunt me for a while now. It was bloody red. A royal red as blood, if there is such a thing.

Marina and Ilari exchanged a few worried looks.

— Now that you know what happened to us, why don't you tell us what happened to you, said Dima calmly. Ilari flinched. They all turned to face Dima, who was sitting calmly in front of the bathroom door. Even Liov took his head out of the bags. The angry Dima was scary but the calm Dima was an even scarier. Ilari lost his voice and his thoughts went blank at the same time.

— Well?

— Nothing much. We were really worried when we saw that you were late, replied Marina



Their history began three hundred years ago when the face of the earth changed forever. Before *they* appeared, humans lived in sin and decadence, their souls were defiled by the darkness of oblivion and their hearts were dirty. Humans forgot their purpose on Terra and strayed away from the right path. They all forgot their origins and about The Heavenly Father.

The world was corrupt and unjust, the laws of the Lord no longer existed. Evil had darkened God's greatest creation: the human soul. That's when *they* showed up. It's not known exactly how or when the gift came: the true blessing of God on earth, the Crystal People. The long-awaited Last Judgment of God began. With holy fire, they burned the heavy sins, and the darkness of evil was extinguished in the heavenly light of the kingdom of God. This is how their story began... the story of everyone. That's when the eleven cities were born. The Crystal People were something else. They were a gift of the Lord to man, the saviors of the human soul. Their essence couldn't be touched by sin or darkness because they were perfect by their very nature. Many priests compared them to the Seraphims, and others were convinced that they truly embodied real angels. The truth, only the Lord knew.

One thing was certain: Crystal People reshaped Terra and they gave it the form it had today. The mundane, simple people and descendants of a decadent world, had the sacred obligation to honor their saviors. Their heads would always bow in front of the greatness of the Crystal People. From the bottom of their hearts, they would humbly pray for the welfare and happiness of those who brought them salvation.

Indeed, Terra was no longer ruled by man. Perhaps the man had ruled for too long a kingdom he didn't deserve ... and which he had almost destroyed. The Crystal People gathered the remains of a world scorched by the darkness of the human soul and breathed life upon them. From the ashes sprang a new civilization: better, prouder, and more righteous, a new Terra that would please the Lord.

It was rare for mundane people to meet any of them, and when it did, it was a great honor. In general, ordinary people were not allowed to interact with Crystal People, not even to raise their eyes from the ground to look at them. Compared to them, humans were far inferior because of their weak, easily corruptible souls. Humans received as a gift an unparalleled Paradise built by God himself and they didn't even appreciate it, let alone honor it. They almost destroyed it.

The blessed ones, as the Crystal People were also called, restored to the world the heavenly greatness it had in the beginnings. It was an unforgivable offense to look at Crystal People in the eyes. But with what right, after all? Crystal People could have just shaved them off of Terra. But they didn't. In the Last Judgment, when the Crystal People were sent to Terra to

judge good and evil, they could have gotten rid of all the parasites without any problem, they could have killed them all, and they could have saved Terra from the burden of ungrateful humanity. But they didn't do that. Mankind received another chance. Again.

Not many people saw them. They lived only in cities and humans built small communities around them. They were not allowed to enter the cities, but only to look at them and admire their greatness. Much was said about their saviors. Most often they were called to be perfect and here we are referring to an unearthly perfection, which humans could not reach even if God himself changed human's very nature. Crystal People wore the beauty of Heavenly Paradise and the aura of angels. They were skilled, healthy, strong, determined and they all were deadly worriers by nature. The flame of divine fire burned in their souls. Sin and darkness could not touch their souls, unlike humans. They were gracious and righteous, merciful and kind, proud and humble, the crown of all the most beautiful and gentle things in the world. Blessed were those who could see their faces. It was rumored from the elders that one would have a long and healthy life if one crossed a path with a crystal man. There were also many rumors about the justice and strength with which they ruled the 11 cities. Of course, they also implemented the rules for human communities. They were in control of these communities since humans could no longer rule themselves. That was the right thing to do, wasn't it? Now they were the lead on Terra. Maybe they should have been from the beginning.

Irina stared at the tall gilded dome church, then sighed. She had to confess and she hated it. She hated that she had to do it by force because that's what the rules said, not because that's what her soul dictated. In the churchyard was a cheerful group of small children listening in fascination to a beautiful story told by a priest with a long gray beard. It was the story of the Beginnings. Irina had learned about it a long time ago.

At that time, she was like those little children: naive, dreamy, and full of hope. She used to look for all possible stories about Crystal People and secretly dreamed that she would meet one. She was fascinated by the story of the Beginnings and used to sneak in often to listen to the story told by the old priest: again and again and again...

She was so grateful that they saved her soul. She admired them, they were just real heroes, the heroes of humankind. How could she not be fascinated by those in control of the

whole world? At that time she still didn't know that they would rule over her soul too. Over every soul on Terra.

— Have you finally thought about what to choose?

Irina sighed sullenly. Her head ached every time she tried to think of the big choice of her life. What could she have chosen? Chemical worker? Metalworker? Of course not...

Katia looked at her curiously, with her large bright green eyes. Her shiny blond hair was carefully braided into a thick crown above her head. It was very long and Katia had always hated to keep him loose. Irina still remembered how little Katia used to go out to play with the kids and her long, heavy tails slowed her down almost all the time. It was quite hard to manage such long and heavy hair.

Her braids always clung to the branches of trees and bushes. She was left behind by everyone almost every time. But it wasn't entirely the fault of her rich braids. Part of the blame layed also with the unruly boys who kept pulling her hair. Irina used to run after them with twigs and nettles and scare them away. Nettles never failed her. With time, a strong friendship developed between the two girls. Besides, they lived only two blocks away. Katia was Irina's main confidant. She was her best friend.

— I'll choose earth-worker, obviously. I can't leave my family behind nor my home, said Irina with her eyes on the ground. But Katia knew that look too well.

— What if the test says otherwise? Asked Katia? She wanted to challenge her. She needed to know what was really in her best friend's heart.

The test? Oh yes, the big and famous test. How could she forget about it?! How ridiculous! The Unifying Test, or as it was also called the Grade 21, had been following her through nightmares for years and years. Irina was very frightened by that test, especially since it had been repeated to her from an early age, how important that test was since it would decide her fate.

The story was quite long and complicated. When a child arrived on Terra, the priests were the first ones to hear the good news. There were traditions from the elders that were sacredly perpetuated for hundreds of years. The godparents had to be present at the time of birth

because they played an important role in the child's upbringing. It didn't matter what the godparents were doing at the time of the childbirth, it was all forgotten since the child was more important than anything.

Nothing was more important than giving birth to a child. Once born, the baby was taken to the church immediately, even before the mother would get a chance to see her own child. The godparents had the sacred duty to take the child to church. With white flowers in their hair, which signify the purity and clarity of the soul, with a cross around their neck, which denotes faith in God, and with lighted candles, a symbol of light and Divine truth.

At the church, the child is greeted by a whole procession of young and old priests alike. Then a ritual is held in which the child receives the blessing and protection of Heavenly Father. In the end, the eldest priest takes the child in his arms and gives him a name. The naming is one of the most important moments in mundane life. This process gives the child the status of citizen and official member of the community on Terra. The name is not just an ordinary one but it must describe his very soul. This is how future citizens in the worldly community were greeted. All the children had gone through that ritual. It was mandatory.

Then came the funny part: twenty-one years of theoretical and practical training and instructions. The twenty-one years were, of course, divided into 21 grades. The children began their training from an early age. They spent 2-3 hours every day in the east courtyard of the church. The church was huge, spread over at least 10 square kilometers, and divided into several sectors: the sector dedicated to learning (which was in its turn divided into several departments according to the age categories of the children. Older children never mingled with younger ones, for example.) The legal sector (which had the role of keeping the community on the right path) the healing sector (where people were healed) and the sector dedicated to prayers and purification of the soul. It took many priests to maintain such a strongly branched institution that had such a great influence on the life of the world.

The training of priests was much more difficult and exhausting than that of ordinary children. They were the bearers of knowledge. They were responsible for the fate of the mundane and were directly accountable to the Crystal People. That is why they were at a higher level in the human community and were treated as such. Everyone respected the priests, any kind

of insult to the priests was considered blasphemy. Blasphemy was severely punished. It was one of the worst sins anyone could commit.

Priests were important to the mundane society. They had the holy wisdom and only they could keep the balance of the world. That is why all the sons of priests were to become priests in their turn. That was the law, that was the tradition. The knowledge had to be passed down from generation to generation since that knowledge was far too important to be passed on to just anyone. Outsiders, who were considered unclean in blood, were not accepted among the priests. It was something outrageous for an ordinary peasant to enter the sacred caste of priests. Their community was a closed and secure circle.

Irina learned a lot of things at school: universal history, geography, mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and other less interesting subjects than those mentioned above. The most important were the practical ones, the working hours of the land. Of course, they had been taught the practice of every sector of mundane work: the work of the earth, the work of animals, metals, wood, minerals, and chemical work.

And all of this for 21 years. At the end of the learning cycle, the Test took place. The test was held just once, during the 21st grade. The terrifying part for the students was that no one knew when the test was taking place. Grade 21 (which covered an entire year) consisted mostly of technical courses and practical exercises. All the students were very attentive ... since the test could take place at any given time without their knowing. The Test determined one's qualification and grade. The grade decided what type of work one will execute in the future and the grade determined what benefits one could get. The higher the grade was, the greater the benefits.

Irina saw many of her classmates fall into breakdowns along with the awful 21st Grade. Not all of the courses and exercises would work out perfectly all the time ... some of them would go wrong naturally. It's common to make mistakes while in school. The biggest fear of all was that of being wrong exactly when you shouldn't. It was real mental torture for them. All of that didn't seem right to Irina. After the rehearsal followed the Celebration of the Distribution.

Most likely, the older priests had observed and analyzed them throughout the year. No, maybe their entire life! She was sure there were some thick files somewhere for each student. And this

is how the famous Distribution took place. It wasn't that hard to put someone in a place if you've been observing them since they were a baby. *What a crap*, thought Irina irritated. She hated that her destiny was in the hands of some old priests. The whole Distribution thing was stupid.

— I hate this situation! Maybe I won't even go to that stupid Distribution! said Irina irritated

— You know we can't do that. Cheer up! We finished school! We are finally adults! said Katia briskly, smiling happily

— Yeah, wow, now we just have to find a man with strong arms and wash his pants for the rest of our life, answered Irina sarcastically, imitating Katya's cheerful tone.

— Who said I wanted a man with strong arms? I prefer the power of my husband to be in his brain, she added proudly.

— Do you see Dima?

Katia winced and stopped. She stared at Irina as if she had two heads.

— Seriously, Katia. I'm not as oblivious as people may think I'm. You two are not as discreet as you would like to be. I saw that in the last few weeks, Dima was getting late from school, from the market, and about ... from everywhere he went to. I even followed him one day. How romantic the two of you are! Lovey-dovey fluffy birds, said Irina, winking and sarcastically throwing a kiss in the air.

— Irina! Katia jumped and quickly put her hands over her friends' mouths. Stop it! It's a secret. I don't want the world to know.

— Why? mumbled Irina confused

— Mom and Dad won't let me have a lover. They plan to marry me with some rich merchant who twisted their minds with his sweet words.

— What ?! asked Irina in shock and took some steps backward. The girl looked at her friend in anger. Irina couldn't believe she was learning all about that nonsense at that moment. Does Dima know about it?

Katia sighed and looked away. Her eyes became sad and wet.

— Please don't tell him, pledged Katia in a thin, weak voice. I want him to know about it from me. I'm afraid he'll break up with me. You know how Dima can be ... I want to see if I can solve this on my own first.

— But you're not alone! shouted Irina in exasperation. She couldn't understand her best friend. She was angry. Angry towards Katia's parents, for the way they treat their daughter, angry at Katia, because she hadn't told her about it, and generally angry about everything and at everyone. She wanted to punch someone in the face.

— Do you promise to not tell him? asked Katia in a whisper, with her large, green, pleading eyes.

— He won't find out anything from me, said Irina coldly. But the wisest thing to do would be to tell Dima about it. You should trust him more, Katia. You are not alone.

The blond-haired girl hesitated, then exhaled loudly. She couldn't look into her friend's eyes at that moment. She was afraid that she was going to be read immediately. Irina had always been good at that sort of thing.

— You don't understand...

— Hey, cutie! How are you, sweetheart! It had been a long time, said a brunette guy from a group of boys who were just passing by in a loud chatter. The guy was tall, tan, and well-built. He had a large, captivating smile stretched across his face while he was looking at Katia. From Irina's perspective, he looked like a puffy cocky rooster.

Katia smiled kindly, waved at him, and then turned her stiff back to the group that had already turned into a commotion of murmurs and merry laughter. All the boys grinned and stared as if they had seen a woman in their lives. Irina was already angry about her friend's situation. Now she was on fire. The last thing that she wished to see at that moment was exactly them...a bunch of male idiots. They all grinned while shamelessly checking on Katia and made suggestive comments to each other right in front of them. Katia grimaced. She felt awkward with all that eyes on her.

Ekaterina Iancu was really beautiful. She was probably the most beautiful girl in the whole village. With her shiny, healthy blond hair that covered her back like a silk veil, her big, clear, green eyes, her slender, tender body ... she looked like royalty. Irina was sure she could

compete with the Crystal People without any problems. Katia, her dear friend, Katia, had always been beautiful. Irina knew that better than anyone. She knew how generous and kind she was to everyone, how good and modest, how hardworking and loyal she was. She knew how beautiful her soul shone. Those boys only saw a body that was pleasing to the eyes and that's all. And every time they saw one, they would start to mess around and put on a show. It happened many times that boys and even grown-up men would catcall her, threw awkward comments, or simply stop her and tell her some stupid shit. It was an entire nightmare that Katia had to go through alone all the time and she still had to endure it. Where were the mighty priests at this kind of time ?! To preach about chastity, saving the soul, God, and the rest of the holy things ?! Of course, she almost forgot that rules for things as irrelevant and insignificant as those didn't exist.

— Let's go, Irina, said Katia, holding her arm gently. They won't stop too soon ...

— Irina took her arm back and stepped forward angrily.

— Just look at you! This is exactly why Crystal People refuse to have any direct contact with us! They have never accepted us and will never do so! They just tolerate us! Because despite everything, we, humans, have remained the same! And I don't think we will ever change! No disaster in history, not even the Apocalypse of God could change the rotten nature of humankind.

The commotion stopped abruptly. It was quiet all around as if the very time had stopped. The boys frowned at the girl standing in front of them with her back straight and her chin up. Stubbornness played a devilish spark in her chocolate eyes. She challenged them all and was not afraid. At least not at that moment. She wanted a reaction from them and would receive one soon. She knew that.

The brunette boy, who had commented earlier and who was most likely the "chief of the tribe," walked briskly and determined until he came directly in front of Irina, whom he looked at with a gloomy twinkle in his eye. The captain didn't like to have his authority questioned in front of his subjects. He was going to make the stupid woman who had provoked him in such a stupid way pay and then put her back in her place.

His strong, thick, battered hand gripped her chin brutally and lifted it.

— If I was you, I'd take better care of that mouth ...he growled in his thick, threatening voice.

— If I was you, I would be more careful where I put my hands ...

All heads instantly turned to the voice that broke the tension in the air. Now all the eyes were settled on the intruder. A boy of medium height, dressed in a long, black, sober coat, stood calm and serene in front of everyone. Nothing could be read on his tanned face. There was nothing in his eyes either. The dark colors of his clothes unpleasantly accentuated the lack of emotions in his eyes. His hands stood relaxed in his pockets.

The brunette boy let go of Irina and tensed. In fact, all of his comrades tensed and he stepped back without taking his eyes off the newcomer. A cheerful grin spread across the intruder's face. His cheerfulness contrasted sharply with the seriousness of his cold, dark eyes. A few ginger strands fell from under the black cap, directly on his small, smooth forehead.

— George! What are you doing here? Irina looked at the boy calmly, with a controlled smile. The bunch of fools ran off immediately after his arrival. George was to become a priest, and any offense to a priest was severely punished. Everyone knew that far too well.

Irina didn't want to show that but she was pretty excited. She didn't know how to behave either. The adrenaline was still running through her veins, and she had been flattered by George's chivalrous intervention. She had never imagined that George would do such a thing for her... or that he would look so good in doing so. She tried to calm down a bit. It was just George, the boring, annoying guy, she told to herself. Nothing had changed. She just wasn't some kind of a stupid girl that would be easily impressed by any silly trick.

— I have to go. See you tomorrow, Irina! Bye, George! It was nice to see you again! said Katia with a tense smile and then walked quickly in the opposite direction

Irina knew that her good friend didn't like George. Honestly, she wasn't sure if there was anyone to like him. George had a strangeness of his own that could be fascinating when it didn't give you shivers on your back. He was always calm, always dressed in black and he used to walk like a shadow behind everyone's back. He rarely smiled and when he did, the smile was either false or ironic. She didn't take into account the creepy grin that had driven the boys away earlier. That wasn't even a smile. Katia had told Irina many times that George was a devil in human skin, and she was pretty sure that most of the people in the village believed that. Unlike the others, Irina didn't see George as a dangerous man that one has to avoid at any cost. She was convinced that

George was maybe just a big jerk, a prankster, and an annoying little priest. He made a positive impression today, so he was less of a jerk.

Irina felt an unconscious need to straighten her hair. George caught her eye and a mischievous smile spread across his pale face. His smile didn't go unnoticed and Irina was now even more self-conscious than before. She consoled herself with the thought that at least it wasn't a fake, forced smile.

— Tell me the joke, so I can laugh too. What are you staring at with that grin? asked Irina, frowning. The remark came out harsher than she wanted to. She was far too excited to think clearly. She bit her lips in frustration at the thought that George had made her feel that way.

— You're beautiful when you're brave. When I see you so blushing like this, I feel like...

— What? To what?

George took two steps closer to Irina and leaned over to her. Two playful sparks gleamed in his cold eyes. Irina bravely faced his gaze, but she felt her heart pounding so hard that it could reach George's ears too. His eyes fell on her trembling lips, which she opened involuntarily.

Irina made a great effort not to take a step back. Her hands clenched into two small, cold fists. She didn't know how it was possible to have such a cold hand in summer. His warm breath touched her red cheeks and she closed her eyes, waiting for it to happen...

George pinched her on the nose. Irina opened her eyes in shock.

— Stop being such a silly girl, Irina. You just won't let yourself be kissed by every knight in shining armor that saves your ass for a moment, said George grinning at the girl's red face of anger and shame

— Certainly not by you, George! she hissed through her teeth and she could barely control her urge to run and cry. But she had no intention of leaving the battlefield like a coward. She was going to face the bastard.

— I told you many times not to call me that. Call me, Teofil.

Teofil was his priestly name. Irina was too angry to notice the playful hue in George's smile or the intense way he watched her every move. The boy bit his lower lip so as not to burst into laughter.

— Go to Hell! Irina left angrily. She couldn't bear to look at him anymore, let alone sit close to him. She'll make him pay for it somehow...

— See you tomorrow at the Distribution Celebration! Shouted George from behind, but Irina didn't turn to answer again.

Irina swore to herself that this would be the last time she would arrange her dress in the mirror. She liked to keep spinning and admiring herself in her new dress. She braided her hair nicely into a simple, elegant bun, leaving two brown curls hanging around the sides of her face. She took some powder from her mother and was going to apply red lipstick. Irina felt beautiful. Her three younger siblings watched her for about 10 minutes as she walked around the mirror. She turned to them and asked, giggling, what she looked like.

— Like unicorn poop, said Ilari bored. Marina slapped him on the back of his neck. Liov uttered all sorts of exclamations and looked admiringly at his older and very colorful sister. He followed her with loyalty, all over the house.

— The perfume! I forgot the perfume! God, how can I forget about perfume? shouted Irina and rushed to her parent's room. Liov immediately followed after her, laughing.

— It's not like the prince would come on a white horse to take her to the castle, commented Ilari sullenly.

— What's up with you? asked Marina

— Nothing! replied Ilari with a strange tone

Irina came out of the bedroom again, this time redder in the cheeks than earlier and smelling of perfume.

— Did you apply blush again? asked Ilari narrowing his eyes at his sister who radiated with all her being. She ignored him and sat down in front of the mirror. Irina looked at herself in the

mirror again. George would gonna regret not kissing her when he had the occasion. He will never have the chance to do so again.

Dima came out of the bathroom and looked at Irina with seriosity, checking her from head to toe. Then he raised his head and met the bright eyes of his sister, who was eagerly awaiting the verdict.

— You're beautiful, said Dima shortly, and smiled. Irina did another pirouette and jumped into Dima's arms, and she kissed him noisily on the cheek.

— Mom and Dad would be proud of you.

— Thank you, whispered Irina excitedly.

— Let's go. We can't miss the opening ceremony.

— Yes... the speeches of the priests will be a delight. How could we miss them...

— Be good while we're gone! Take care of Liov! said Dima and closed the door behind him.

— Yes, daddy, answered Ilari bored, looking reluctantly at the closed door.

The Distribution took place every year, on June 24. It was always held in the Central Square of the village, after sunset. Only priests, the students in question, and their parents were allowed to participate at the Distribution Celebration. The place was cleaned well before, decorated with garlands, lights, and flowers. An improvised wooden stage was placed in the center, which in turn was decorated with blue silk ribbons and wild summer flowers. The flag of their city, Tomis, hung like a solemn crown above the stage. A row of nicely arranged chairs was in front of the stage. The family members were sitting there. To the left and right of the stage, all the students were standing in line. Each of them had their patch with their name on it. Everything had to be well organized and tidy. Behind the stage was a dance floor lit by small, colorful light bulbs. There was also a makeshift canteen, with traditional food and drinks like pork with sauce, fried sausages, cream cheese, salads, chicken steak, pies, and boiled sweet vodka.

Irina was starving and could not wait any longer to eat something. She hadn't been able to eat anything all day because of her anxiety. Now she was sitting quietly in her patch and waiting her

turn. Each graduate was to receive a medallion with a gold coin from the abbot of the church. On that medallion was inscribed the qualification of each student and it was also the proof of their graduation. Irina glanced at Dima. He sat relaxed on one of the front chairs and winked at her. The priests began to shout names. There was applause and cheers everywhere. Irina was no longer so confident. She didn't know who had arranged them in that way, but she cursed him in her mind. Katia was on the other side of the stage and to her right and left were Maria and Paulina, two girls she had never talked to and would not start from now on. She felt the need to talk though.

Ever since she got here, her eyes flew in all directions, looking for someone. Irina was looking for George. After the ceremony, she would find him. The day before she had looked like a fool. She had felt like an insignificant carpet that had just been trampled on. She had to somehow erase that outrageous memory and image from her head, but especially from George's head. Yesterday she had been too humiliated and angry to save her wounded pride and had run away a little too fast. Irina scolded herself in her mind. But now that some time passed, she felt much stronger and more self-confident. She would find him and show him how...

— Irina Dragomir!

Irina winced, blinked in confusion, and then looked to the scene where the abbot of the church looked at her with a warm smile and sad eyes. All the students looked at her. She straightened her back and walked to the stage. She climbed the wooden steps with all the courage she could muster in the few minutes of psychological preparation and confidently went to the middle of the stage, just to the right of the abbot. In front of her lay a sea of heads, all aimed at her with curiosity and interest. Where would Dragomir's eldest daughter end up? What would she choose? Irina had heard these questions swirling endlessly in her head for a few days now, and now she could swear that she saw them imprinted on the faces of the people gathered at the celebration.

The old abbot began to give a speech dedicated to Irina's evolution and achievements over the years. The words passed by Irina's ears, as if she could no longer understand anything that was happening around her. Since the ceremony began, she had felt this way and couldn't understand why. She hadn't been nervous before, in fact, she didn't even care.

She was excited that she was going to have fun with her friends and had been looking forward to this day. Something suddenly changed inside her and was getting worse and worse every second that passed. She couldn't concentrate. She felt like a metal wall was crushing her chest, she couldn't breathe normally and she started to feel nauseous. Her heart was beating so hard that it started to hurt her, she had the impression she was going to faint at any given moment, right there in front of everyone. How embarrassing! She didn't even know what expression she had on her face. Paradoxically, she felt like someone was watching her and this feeling burned her inside.

For the first time, her eyes left the imaginary point they had been looking at and began to look for faces in the crowd. She found Dima. He sat relaxed in his chair and looked at her with serene and dreamy eyes. Then he made visual contact with her. A warm, encouraging smile spread across his freckled face. For some reason, this simple image relaxed her heart a little and she felt that she was taking the first real breath of air after a good amount of time.

All the people gathered at the celebration had pleasant and relaxed faces. The atmosphere was such, she couldn't understand why she was so nervous. Somewhere on the edge of the stage, stood George dressed in his usual priestly garb. He wasn't smiling. He had red cheeks and sparkling eyes as if he had drunk something hard before. George quickly noticed that he was being looked at and when he saw that it was Irina, he winked at her and grinned. Irina would have smiled if she hadn't been in that rigid pose on stage so she was just smiling inside herself. For some reason, she felt that her smile was a sad one.

Her eyes again flew away from the people gathered at the celebration, and behind her, hidden among the shadows, was a tall, motionless and shapeless figure. Irina felt a twinge of pain in her heart and suddenly stopped breathing. She only hoped that her shock was not visible on her face. Her head started spinning. How long has he been sitting there? What did he want? And especially why she felt like he was looking at her with such a rotten intensity that he was physically hurting her.

Suddenly the relaxed atmosphere becomes tense out of nowhere. Irina could see how people's faces were now transfigured by confusion, shock, and pity. What had happened? Irina heard nothing of the abbot's words. Did she do something wrong?

— Young lady, can you hear me? You have received the honor of serving in the holy city of the Saviors of Souls. Step forward to proudly receive your priceless new status.

— What? Irina instinctively turned her head to Dima. He was already standing up. The expression on his face was somewhere between confusion, panic, and horror.

— Come, child, don't be afraid. It's your destiny and a blessing of the Heavens said the old abbot in his everlasting good-natured voice and sad eyes.

But Irina didn't want to move. No, in fact, her own body tensed and refused any kind of movement. Her heart was pounding harder than ever and her knees were beginning to tremble. What was happening? It made no sense. It had to be some kind of a lucid nightmare because otherwise...

Servitris was a new field that emerged 10 years ago. At first, no one understood what this field is about and what it is useful for. It had nothing to do with the sacred and natural domains of existence on Terra. Only a few young people had been sent but no one was from their community. Even now it was unclear why this was implemented and why the crystal people would need humans to serve them.

Their communities had been well defined for several hundred years and have never mixed for anything in the world. Humans were considered inferior and immoral beings, so the Saviors never interfered with them, nor allowed anyone access to any cities they built. Then why? What had changed? As a servitris, one was sent to a city of crystal people and their duty was to serve them honestly, with an open heart, and with great loyalty. Students were taught to be grateful for such a miraculous change because it meant that human souls were beginning to purify themselves and the Crystal people had noticed it. Others, more optimistic, felt that the Crystal people would soon open their city's gates to them and that they would all live in peace and harmony.

In any case, this work field was regarded as a special honor and the person in question was instantly elevated to a higher status, similar to that of priests. Unlike the other work fields, this was not something that could be refused or changed. It was an irrefutable and undeniable sentence. Those who were to become servitris cut off all ties with their families. Once they entered the city, they would never return home.

— Wait a minute, there must be a mistake. I'm not ... I can't...you have to understand...that's it...

— I understand, child. I understand all too well, said the gentle priest and clutched Irina in his arms. She was reluctant to cry and wanted to behave worthy of such an honor.

The old abbot put the azure medallion around her neck. Her new medallion glistened elegantly in the moonlight. It was unlike any medallion she had ever seen before. It was carved in a deep blue crystal. In the middle of it was a crescent moon on which a snake with large sharp fangs curled around. Everyone applauded and Irina came down confused from the podium. The tense atmosphere dissipated in the blink of an eye and the naming ceremony quietly started again.

People's faces were relaxed and excited again. Irina despised them. She despised everyone and couldn't bear to look at them anymore. Not when there was a heavy, gloomy fog of iron in her soul.

Someone suddenly pulled her to his chest and Irina saw herself surrounded by two big arms. It was Dima. She would have recognized him anyway and anywhere. He then grabbed her by the shoulders and looked her in the eye with seriousness and determination.

— We'll go talk to the abbot. There must be a mistake. We'll ask for a reassessment. I'm not gonna let you walk away from us, you hear me?

Irina remained silent and looked away.

— You do want to...stay, right? asked Dima slightly hesitantly.

— Of course, I do! I do...but ... but, and her voice broke into sighs. Then tears started rolling down her pale cheeks.

Dima hugged her again and soothingly patted her on the back.

— It's okay, Irina. We'll work this out. You're not going to get rid of us this easily!

Irina was heartbroken. She no longer had the power, nor dared to say anything more. How could she tell him that it's useless and nothing can be changed anymore? She felt it. She knew it. She would be separated from them forever.

— Come on! The abbot came down from the stage! We have to catch up! Dima pulled Irina's hand and began to run after the abbot, who headed slowly to the exit.

— Wait! Please stop!

The old man stopped and turned around smiling.

— I was waiting for you, young Dima.

— Please approve a reassessment. Irina can not be a servitris. She doesn't have the right profile for such a major responsibility. To the city of Crystal people, we have always sent the most precious products, the ones with the highest quality, the best of the best. We cannot afford to

wrong on our saviors by sending someone unsuitable after they have so generously allowed us to serve them and dwell among them. It is far too important to mankind that we are properly represented in the city of crystal people and sincerely show them our usefulness and our gratitude. You know Irina very well since childhood. She's clumsy, careless, head in the clouds, and far too dreamy. She's stubborn, disorganized, and lazy! She has no quality fit for a holy servant. In the name of the Lord and for the sake of our saviors, I ask you to reconsider and make your assessment again, said Dima firmly and resolutely, drilling the priest with his fiery gaze.

Irina had never seen Dima speak so respectfully about Crystal people ever.

The priest smiled and patted Dima on the shoulder.

— I didn't expect any less from you, Dima. And I'm proud of the person you've become. I am proud of you both and I assure you that your parents would be especially proud too.

— What does that have to do with what I said...

— A reassessment will not be possible, said the abbot with seriousness and turned his back to the two siblings.

— What? Why? Why the hell not?

— Because we're not the ones orchestrating things, young man. The servitris was implemented by them. They decide. They choose. They order. We can only obey with wide smiles imprinted on our lips.

— But there must be something that we can do! Why...

— Dima! Irina!

Dima turned confused at the voice that shouted at him with gravity. Behind them, ran George with a grave look on his face. The blushed face of earlier had been replaced by a sickly pallor. His eyes were devoid of any glare and his lips tightened in a thin line. Small swathes of sweat ran through his forehead. Irina had never seen George with such an expression on his face before. George was always calm, composed, and unperturbed. What else could have happened that day that was beginning to look more and more like a nightmare?

— Go home. Now! said George calmly but with an extinguished voice

Dima's blood froze in his veins and his hands tightly clenched Irina's wrists. Something in George's expression made her terrified.

— What happened...

Irina didn't get to finish the sentence because she had been pulled hard by Dima who had started running towards the exit. The abbot disappeared and behind them, George looked at them with intensity. Irina's heart began to beat madly again. Dima ran with all the strength he was capable of, and Irina struggled to keep up with him. A grim chill set in when she saw several people fleeing in horror from the building where they were living.

The staircase of the building was empty, there was absolutely nothing to be heard besides their heavy breaths. It was quiet, too quiet. The two siblings hurriedly climbed the stairs and barged into their apartment.

Irina's heart hardened. The ill state she had had on stage, returned but this time it had hit her with much more power than before. She tried very hard not to scream or pass out. And yet she was so tempted to scream, out of fear, despair, pain, and anger. She would have wanted to move but she couldn't feel her legs. She could no longer hear her thoughts, her breath, or her heart beating. It was as if she had died right then at that moment. Or perhaps the Heavens had turned her into a stone, as she had heard in the stories of the priests.

Dima collapsed on his knees right next to her but Irina didn't dare to look at him. She didn't even want that.

Their apartment was destroyed. Completely destroyed. All their parents' life's work had been trampled upon mercilessly. Broken windows, shattered furniture, banged and scratched walls, cupboards....and there was smoke coming out of the parents' bedroom.

Ilari was lying on the kitchen floor with his back to them. He stood still, asleep in a broken time. Had anyone ever seen the tireless Ilari sit so quietly? He rested unperturbed and around his tousled blond head reigned a halo of red, raw, and viscous liquid.

From under the broken sofa could be heard the sobs of Marina who looked into the nothing with big blue eyes teary and completely lifeless. Her neatly combed hair was messy and tangled, and there were some dry traces of tears on her pale cheeks. Her lips were dry and bitten, she crouched and swayed back and forth at a grim pace.

In her arms hung lifeless, two little hands, fatty and slightly violet. Marina tightened it harder.

— Why?

A strangled whisper broke the grave silence. She couldn't even recognize that voice...

— Why? Why such? Why us? What did we do wrong?

The voice sounded monotonous. Neither whispered nor shouted. No emotion was read in that foreign voice, but the questions seemed to swirl like an endless refrain in Irina's empty mind. Two tall silhouettes covered in black capes emerged from the parents' room. Black, dense smoke began to gradually creep into the kitchen. The silhouette that looked out through the window with his back turned at them, took a few steps back, and faced them.

Irina was out of breath. The headache that had drained her at the Celebration but had disappeared due to the shock, reappeared again. Irina refrained from making any grimace of pain. She looked away because she felt like she was not able to look at him. His gaze burned her and it seemed to be bizarrely familiar.

— There's no time. Time has lost its patience long ago.

Irina didn't think someone like him could exist. It seemed unreal, unnatural, and illogical. Nothing about him seemed to comply with any written or unwritten law of nature. He was like a sublime bud born of chaos or perhaps an ancient painting of a dead God. There are no words that could describe him and Irina had certainly lost them all.

Black hair as dark chaos curled elegantly around his small ears. Purple reflections glowed in his dark silk hair. Ivory, immaculate and clean skin contrasted sharply with the dark curls. Eyes, large, round, and bright, glistened somberly in the dim room. They were like two dark, cold abysses of nothingness. Their pitch black and grim shade foretold death. The man fixed her with his gaze from under his long and elegant eyelashes. His plump, sensuous blood-red lips stretched out in a tight, thin line.

Her chest was hurting. She was burning inside. She couldn't bear to be looked at by him. She didn't want that. It had to stop but he didn't stop. She lifted her eyes out of the ground and looked at him furiously. Yes, Irina was seething with anger and a shiver of inexplicable resentment. She felt defeated and powerful at the same time.

His face was the same: Calm, controlled, devoid of emotions or any trace of life. His cheeks were pale. But this time, Irina could see in those deep holes of his eyes, a small glister of pure anger. They were not fixed on her face but on the blue medallion that hung around her neck.

Dima was no longer next to her. He bandaged Ilari's head with trembling arms. He had bitten his lips to the point of blood, and an unquenchable lake of seething emotion was smoldering in his eyes. Irina was suddenly afraid. Afraid for Dima.

— Your name was carved in the book of death, but here, life gives you another chance. I don't know whether to call it luck or damnation, he said monotonously and then turned again facing the window.

His voice was neither hard nor soft. It doesn't sound loud and powerful like a ruler's, but it doesn't sound warm and angelic like a hero's either. It was dead. A dead voice. So why did she -

— You have no soul! What lies beyond your angelic armor? whispered Dima with anger but his faded voice cut sharp in the persistent silence that was suffocating her for so long.

The man turned his head and looked at Dima for the first time.

— Silence. I'm offering you a pact. You'll be more useful to me alive than dead. Give me the girl and I'll let you all live.

Irina winced. She clenched her fists until her fingernails cut in in her palms.

Dima fixed him with his gaze and Irina could swear that she saw living fire playing in his eyes.

— The girl is not something that someone like you could have, hissed Dima in a low, menacing tone.

— I want to hear what the angel of death has to say. You're here to take all of our souls, but you're gonna settle just for mine? I'm right here, if you have the pact to make, you'll make it with me.

Irina's voice was firm, controlled, and completely linear. Dima didn't recognize that tone, nor the expression on his sister's face. It was like he was looking at a stranger.

— Paper and pen said the man, and one of the masked servants brought them in a flash of seconds. Without glancing at her, he began to scribble on the white piece of paper. Then he wrapped it up and gave it to Irina.

— With my hands in your hands I lay down the lives of your family. You choose.

Irina looked at the paper but couldn't read anything. It was not written in her language or their language.

— And now I'm supposed to sign my death sentence? Should I guess what it says on paper or is it all just a morbid game? asked Irina, looking impassively at the paper hanging in her hands.

— Irina, don't sign anything! shouted Dima and rushed to snatch the paper from Irina's hands but the dark-eyed man was faster

— You're a servitris. You will be sent to Khalan's House. You won't be loyal to Khalan, you'll be loyal to me. You will serve me and give me information about that house.

— A spy?! That's far too dangerous and reckless, not to say that...

— Then you'll all die here and now. My patience and generosity are not things to play with, said the man promptly and coldly, throwing a menacing look at Dima.

— You promise no one will get hurt if I sign this and become your servant?

— Yes.

— Irina, wait, we don't know what you're signing, he could have written there anything...

— Dima...

— I'm not letting you...

— Dima, I...

— Something else, anything but this...

— Dima! That's enough! I am the eldest here and I must protect you. Marina, Ilari, Liov, they need us. I have to do it. You know that, said Irina firmly clutching Dima's shoulders.

He looked at her in bewilderment and seemed to be completely at a loss for words. He looked young, confused, and lost. For the first time in a long time, Irina saw in Dima a helpless child: Small, powerless, and defeated.

Irina signed the white sheet and threw the pen on the floor. Soon after, the two men in long black hoods brutally grabbed her and pulled her out the door. Dima yelled after her and swooped in to pull her back but he got kicked and brutally pushed in the back. There was a bang in the back and a whimper. Irina turned her head back but saw nothing.

Irina's eyes were filled with tears. She didn't get to say goodbye. She never got to look them in the eyes again. Ilari was still there on the floor and she didn't say goodbye to him. He had to promise to stay out of trouble. Marina, oh, the grown-up Marina,...she hadn't even given her a real look since she walked into the apartment. Not because she didn't want but because she couldn't stand the look on her face. At that moment, Marina no longer looked like Marina, and Irina wanted to erase that image from her mind.

Liov, little Liov was sleeping cradled in the arms of Marina. She would have liked to read him one last story and kiss him on his cute, red cheeks. She wanted to give him a last smile, a farewell smile. But her last memory of him was not with smiles but with the little hands hanging lifeless.

Mom, dad... they had been gone for so long and she had waited for them so long. She would never see them again. She would never hear them again. She would no longer feel their

warm hugs. What are they going to say when they come back and find that disaster? Why weren't they home? Nothing would have happened if they were with them...

Catia, her good friend had looked so beautiful at the ceremony in her long blue dress. Her eyes glowed with happiness and the excitement could have been read easily in her rosy cheeks. She didn't know where she had been appointed. She had not looked for her since her appointment as a servitris. Did she feel sorry for her? Was she worried or perhaps upset? They left suddenly. She didn't get to throw another last word at her. She should have looked for her face more often, she should have told her more often how much their friendship meant to her.

And George...it now seemed more like a distant and erased memory from childhood when time ran out of patience.