

ONE WORLD. ONE RACE. ONE LIE.

Escaping Olympo

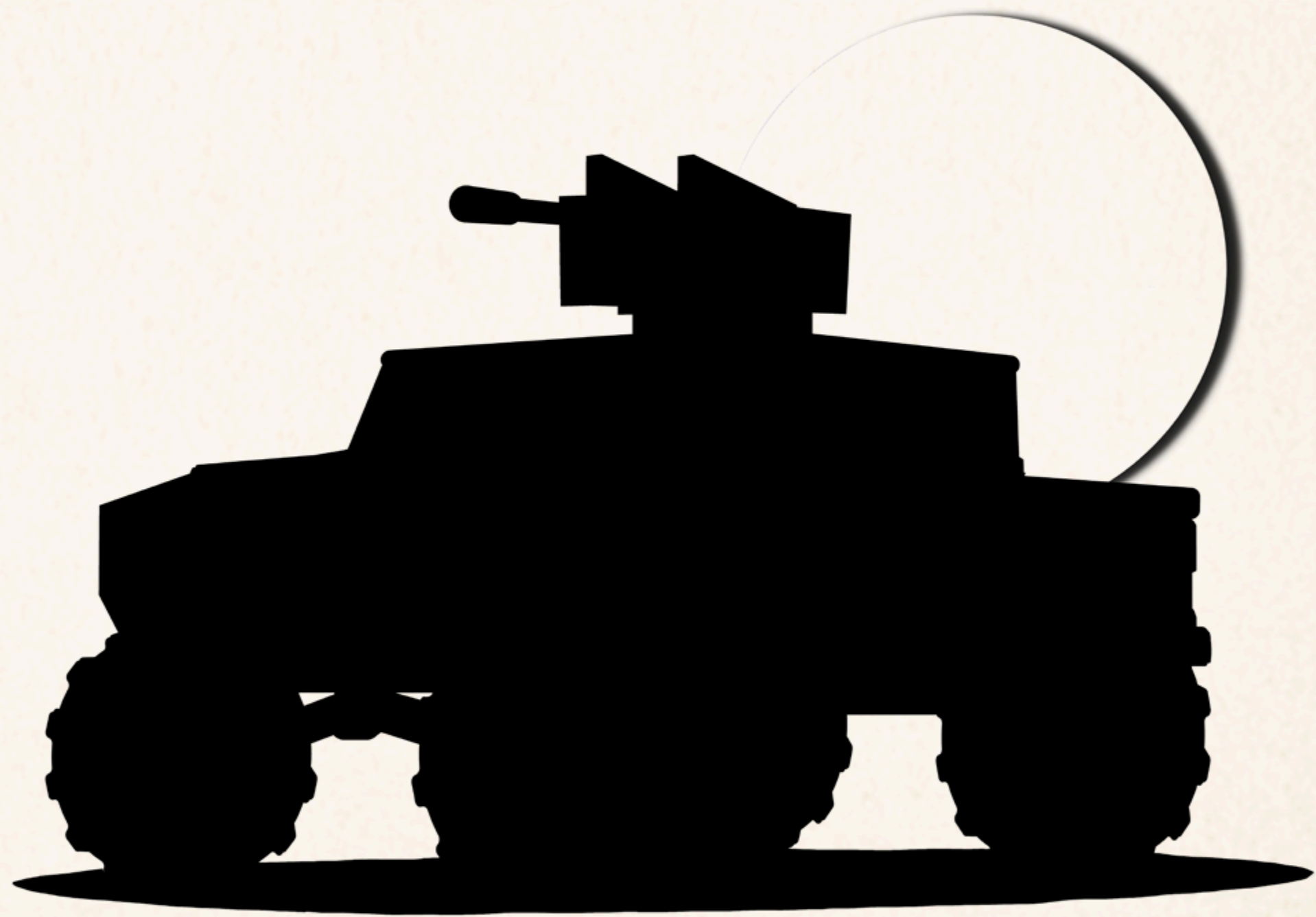


L. HAGENSEN

PUREBRED I

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ESCAPING OLYMPO



It began with the wars. First there were the small wars, which were about who gets the last natural gas and access to important ports and strategic areas. Then came the big wars, which were about which religion was the right one and which people were in charge. People fled from A to B, from B to C, and back to A. In the end, people no longer knew who they were or where they were, and the world leaders decided enough was enough. First they banned religions, then they banned all languages except English. As if that weren't enough, they erased the borders of all countries and banned the races. Everything burned and there was war again. In the end, everyone spoke English, no one lived where they used to live, no one believed in any god, and everyone had dark hair, brown eyes, and as many races as possible in their genes.

At least almost.

THORBI'S BOOK



1.

“You can’t be serious,” echoes through the thin tin wall. The shouting voice is angry, and I back away a few meters. Laban has asked me to come tonight, but he already has a visitor, and whoever is there has lost his cool. No one yells at Laban, no one, ever.

I hear someone muttering, probably Laban, trying to argue, then there is shouting again. Now I hear who it is. Vico.

“No. I refuse.”

The door flies open, and Vico doesn’t stop until he sees me. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but he shakes his head and storms past me. I have never seen Vico so angry, and it scares me.

“Come in.” Laban stands in the doorway, running his hand over his forehead and long black hair.

“What’s wrong with Vico?”

“I have something to tell you,” Laban says. “Sit down.”

I sit down on one of the chairs in the only room in the house. The narrow bed is made, and no dirty dishes or clothes are lying around, unlike the messy house I live in with geezer, who is unfortunately my grandpa.

“So,” Laban says, sitting down on the other side of the table. “Dora will come to the meeting tomorrow. She’s going to join the group.”

The Freak? I try to make out the words, but they don’t stick, they just slide around in my brain like slippery worms.

“Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“She killed my sister.” I clench my knees and hands and feel my body tense as if a thousand kilometers of nerves have turned to steel.

“That’s not true, Thorbi.”

“Oh, come on. Everybody knows that.”

“You know what the Board unraveled.”

Suicide. Laban knows it’s not true.

“Mira was all I had. Everything.”

“You have us.”

“Not if *she* joins us. Then I won’t. And she is a freak, Laban, a freaking anomaly.”

“I’ve made up my mind. She’s going to come with us. I wanted to tell you before the meeting.”

“How can you? Mira was your best friend. You are a freaking traitor, Laban.”

He doesn’t answer, just looks at me with his dark eyes. That’s what he said to Vico, that’s why Vico yelled at him, and he was right to do so. I want to scream too, but I can’t, the lump in my throat is so big I can barely breathe. You can’t rely on anyone, I think, and rise from the chair. If Laban does this, you can’t trust anyone.

“I’ll see you at school,” Laban says, picking up our cups. His shoulders are slumped and his back sticks out as if his spine has grown too long and crooked. He looks like an old man, but I know he’s only sixteen. A year older than me, or a hundred. Laban has no age. Even the adults leave him alone.

The alley in front of Laban's house is narrow and dirty, just like the alley where my own house is. The sky is black and starless, but a faint light flickers through the windows, and it's not hard to see where to go. Soon people will turn off their lights, you have to save electricity, and then it will be difficult to find the right way home.

"Hey, Thorbi, wait."

I turn around and see a dark head coming toward me. It takes me a while to recognize the big eyes and the scar on his upper lip. It's Spenser, my best friend.

"Brother," I say, pressing my knuckles against his.

"Did you go to Laban?"

"Yeah," I say, glad to have company. "He told me he was going to let the Freak into the group."

"Uh, he must have been pulling your leg. Why would he do that?"

"I guess he feels sorry for her." I fall silent, thinking. "Laban didn't say why, just that he'll let her come along."

"Are you serious? What are you going to do?"

Quit, I want to answer, but can I? Of course I can't. The Survivors are the only thing that makes life worth living in this freaking town. Laban is right. Without the group, I have no one.

"I don't know," I say.



2.

This night I dream a memory. We are a family. Mom, Dad and Mira are still alive and we are sitting around the table. It's morning and apparently food is scarce because the porridge is thinner than usual.

"They must have said something, didn't they?" says Dad, shoveling the porridge into his mouth like it's the most delicious thing he has ever eaten.

"No," Mira says, sliding the spoon back and forth on her plate.

"Eat your porridge, Mira," Mom says, mumbling something about her being too skinny.

Mira takes a spoonful of porridge and tries to swallow it before it touches the roof of her mouth.

"I don't understand. You are about to turn fifteen and no one has talked to you about what you will be. That doesn't sound very likely. Is it something you are unhappy with and that's why you don't want to say it?"

"No, Dad. No one has talked to me yet. Maybe I'm not good for anything."

"That was the dumbest thing I have ever heard," Mom says. "You are smarter than anyone else in school."

“Not smarter than Laban,” Mira says. “Or Vico.”

“I think you are,” Mom says. Dad interrupts her.

“And no one has talked to them either?”

“Yes, they have,” Mira hesitates. “Vico will be an inventor, like his father. Laban is going to school for another year, but everyone knows he is going to be a teacher.”

“Did you do something, Mira? Are they looking for you? You are not seeing anyone, are you?”

“Of course she hasn’t been seeing anyone,” Mom says. “Mira would never do anything like that. She is a good girl.”

Mira rolls her eyes and pushes her plate away. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“This can be serious,” Dad says. “I’ve never heard of it taking this long.”

“Calm down,” Mira says, standing up. “I’ll ask about it at school today. Most of us don’t know yet, they probably just have a hard time classifying us. Teaching would be fun, I think.”

Mira goes, and I stay. My plate of porridge is empty, and Mom is happy. Dad looks worried; you can’t stand out, you can’t be different, and anything that doesn’t fit the pattern set by the Board is probably forbidden.

“I want to be a carpenter,” I say to reassure him, and it works. He looks a little happier.

That’s the day he dies.



3.

The sun is already low when Laban unlocks the door and urges us to enter. Piero, always impatient, has climbed the high steel column to pass the time. Now he slides down without using his feet and effortlessly jumps the last meters to the ground. I wish I were that nimble.

“Be quiet,” Laban says as we sit in a ring on the cold concrete floor. I stare at the burning torch in the center and at the faces of my friends shimmering dimly in the light.

“I have something to say,” Laban says. “Soon Dora will be here.”

“The Freak?” says Keidra unintelligibly.

“I have decided to let her join our group.”

“Are you kidding?” says Lora. “We can’t have her with us. That’s forbidden. *She* is forbidden.”

“Just like our escape,” Laban says.

There is silence.

“Besides being forbidden, she’s a murderer.” Lora looks directly at Laban, but Laban doesn’t avert his gaze.

“That’s what you think,” he says. “I know she’s not. The Board would have convicted her of murder if she had killed

Mira. They want nothing more than to get rid of her. They wouldn't have saved Dora's life if they even suspected she was guilty of murder."

"You know the Freak?" Spenser's wide eyes are so big you could serve dinner on them.

"Yes, I know Dora."

Everyone knows *about* the Freak, but Laban knowing her is news. How would he know her? Her parents were siblings, and the Board executed them right after she was born. If the Freak didn't have a close relative on the Board, she would have been killed too because she is an anomaly.

"How can you know her?" Keidra voices what everyone is wondering. "She has never been to school, never gone out, and she is kept in that house up on the Ledge."

"It doesn't matter how I know her. I have offered her the chance to join our group. She'll be here soon."

"But" someone says, and I feel their eyes on me, watching and hesitating. I don't look back, but stare intently into the filament of the torch until all I can see is the pulsing light. Even when I close my eyes, a glowing oval dances behind my lids.

"Lora, can you pick her up? She's waiting outside the door," Laban says. Lora slowly gets up. She gives us an anxious look, but doesn't dare defy Laban. No one defies Laban, except Vico apparently, because he is not here. Doesn't he want to stand by Laban's side anymore?

There is a noise outside our hiding place and a knock on the door. Lora is back with *her*. Anger and hatred stab me in the stomach as Laban unlocks the door and lets them in. I no longer see Lora, only the creature behind her. The head is hidden under a large hood, but I know the skin on the creature's drooping face is pale and the eyes are blue. She's a deformity. The epitome of the cuss word freak.

We are all dark-haired and brown-eyed, but we don't look much alike. Laban's eyes, for example, are on the edge of black, and now he looks directly at the Freak and nods for her to sit down next to him. Lora smiles uncertainly and comes over to me. She shrugs, as if to say she is sorry for bringing my worst enemy here. I refuse to return her gaze.

The creature flips down her hood and a thick, light brown braid falls out and lands on her shoulder. Everyone gasps, including me. It's just too sick, and I'm sitting so close I could touch her if I reached out my hand. Or kill her if I had a knife.

"Welcome to the Survivors, Dora," Laban says. The Freak's eyes slide quickly over each of us, stopping when they meet mine. Does she see my hatred? Her unnatural blue eyes look sad ... sad and defiant.

Laban clears his throat and begins to introduce us. The Freak nods briefly each time he says a name. I feel like I'm in a game without understanding the rules. Who is playing here? Laban? The Freak? My eyes are fixed on the light brown head, not even daring to blink for fear of missing something. Why is she here? What is Laban doing? The pain of my nails cutting into my palms makes my eyes water.

"Listen," Laban finally says. "The reason I asked Dora to come here is because D-day is coming up. The project Mira, Vico, Kal, Piero and I have been working on is ready. We'll escape from Olympo in four weeks, when the autumn storms have begun and the moon enters its dark phase."

Flee Olympo in four weeks? Lora, Spenser and I look at each other. Did we even believe the escape would actually happen? And why does Laban have to bring the Freak? It's me she should be afraid of, the killer, and it's safer for her to stay in Olympo than to leave town with our group.

Perhaps Laban isn't concerned for her safety. The Freak is always alone, always excluded. She is not like us. She is not different like Bjern the Dwarf, Blind Hurdy, or Bou, who talks like a two-year-old even though he is an adult, but different in a dangerous way. If we don't think we have a future in Olympo, what about the Freak? No one wants anything to do with her. If it wasn't for Mira, I might have felt sorry for her.

"How will we escape?" Keidra scratches her cheek. She is thin, the skin under her eyes is dull purple, and her belly is strangely large and swollen. Keidra wants to leave Olympo before she dies. She is grieving too, I suddenly realize, and I feel ashamed that I'm only thinking about myself. Keidra's brother Kal disappeared a few months after Mira's murder. He went exploring and never returned.

"How shall we escape? You will see," says Laban. "I'll let you know in due time when the escape will take place."

"What will we take with us?" Piero doesn't question D-day or the Freak, but he is also Laban's most loyal companion. Mira told me that Piero is the son of Olympo's most notorious thief. Laban probably thinks he will end up just like his father if he doesn't get out of here. The Board decides what becomes of us, but if you are the son of a thief, you are branded and end up at the bottom, with the dung workers. They are the ones who collect all our shit from the sewers and spread it on the plantations. I guess Piero sees Laban as his savior.

"Vico and I are working on it," Laban says. "He calculates how much each package can weigh, and the weight determines how much we can take."

"Where is Vico?" asks Keidra. The Freak, sitting with her head down, lifts it and searches Laban's eyes. She probably understands that Vico isn't here because of her.

“He is over there,” whispers Lora, pointing to the door, and there he stands. Tall and quiet, with tense, broad shoulders and hands clenched into fists.

“Come and sit down,” says Laban, and Vico comes. He saunters across the floor, sits down next to Keidra, and nods quickly to everyone except the Freak. She is like air to him, and I wish I could be that cold. But Vico has come. That must mean he still wants to escape with us, which is good, because we probably won’t make it without him.

“We’ll go north.” Laban looks at Keidra and tries to soften his words. “This isn’t the direction Kal took when he disappeared, so we won’t ... see him.”

She didn’t even have a body to say goodbye to. But at least her brother hadn’t been murdered.

“You need to get shoes if you don’t already have them. And a jacket, it might get colder where we are going. Vico and I need to do some more math, then we’ll tell you exactly what to pack. The meeting is over.”

Vico rises slowly, without taking his eyes off Laban. He hasn’t said a word yet and leaves the room as quietly as he came. This doesn’t feel good. A rift has formed between us, a rift with Laban as the hammer and the Freak as the wedge, and it scares me.

The evening darkness has thickened as we come out, and everyone is hurrying to get home. Lora sneaks up beside me and grabs my arm.

“Hey,” she says, “I’m sorry. I don’t want her to join the group either, but Laban is our leader, we can’t defy him.”

“You’re going the wrong way, Lora,” I say, shaking off her hand. “If you don’t go back, you won’t get home until people have turned out the lights.”

“Maybe I can sleep at your place?”

Is she trying to put us in jail? I look at her to see if she is serious. With Lora, sometimes I don't know.

"I'm only joking, I'm going home now. I just wanted to tell you that we are on your side. We all are. We just have no choice but to obey Laban."

"Unless everything is a lie, Lora. Maybe she fooled Laban and got him to take her, when in reality she is setting a trap for us. What if the Board suspects something? Everyone knows we are friends."

She wrinkles her nose and snorts. Lora and I look pretty much alike, with our freckles and curly hair. But most of all, she looks like my sister Mira.

"I think you are wrong," she says, putting her hand on my cheek. "The only one who cares about her is her uncle."

"Her *parents'* big brother," I scoff.

"Their big brother." Lora pulls her mouth down as if she has tasted something disgusting. "Don't talk about it. It's thanks to him that she is still alive. No matter how important he is, no one else would believe a word she says. She's nothing. Useless."

I nod as if I agree, but I don't know what I'm thinking anymore.

"I have to go." She stands on her tiptoes and touches my lips with hers.

"Be careful," I say, thinking of the degenerates that wander our alleys like damaged moths in the dark.

Geezer is sitting in the rocking chair in the kitchen drinking pota when I get home. Pota is made from potatoes and is officially the strongest intoxicant in Olympos. Unofficially, there are worse things. Strange fungi that feed on human brains, causing their victims to degenerate

until they wander aimlessly at night, avoiding daylight. There are no homeless in Olympos, but those who abuse pota and mushrooms can rarely stay sober long enough to remember where they live and find their way home.

“Wan’ some?” asks geezer, nodding at the pota bottle. I know he will grin and pull the bottle toward him if I say yes. “Where’ve ya been?”

“With Laban. He is helping me with my homework.”

Geezer grunts and shakes his bald head. He doesn’t think much of studying; he thinks it’s a waste of time. When I’m fifteen and start as an apprentice, our food rations will increase and he will have access to more pota. I would rather be in school than in a work group and I dread the day I turn fifteen. It’s only a few more months until I’m considered an adult, but I feel like I’m not cut out for anything.

“You’re thinking too much, kid,” geezer says without slurring, blinking at me over the rim of his glass.

“I’m thinking about Mira,” I say, and it’s not a lie, not really. “And about the Freak.”

“Yeah,” geezer mutters, sipping the murky liquid. “Unnatural, that one. Blue eyes.” He curls his lips to show his disgust. “You’re Mira’s brother, you should take care of it yourself if the Board doesn’t solve the problem.”

Geezer wants me to kill the Freak, and he makes sure I hear it at least once a day. He rolls a thin zig from the dried tobacco leaves we grow in our backyard, and a sharp smoke billows from his mouth as he lights it. “Crush that bitch’s head like she did our Mira,” he says, coughing dryly. “That’s your duty, boy.”

Our little house in the Bottom stands in a long row of equally dilapidated houses with small lots in the back. The alley in front is narrow and dirty and on the other side is

a cluster of shacks like a mirror image. I leave the kitchen and walk through the room where Mom and Dad used to sleep into my now lonely bedroom. Geezer moved in here after Mira died, but I would be better off without him and his alcohol-scented bitterness. After making sure the door is locked, I open the window and climb out the back. I have a stash of dried tobacco leaves in a waterproof bag behind the tin wall, and it's not long before I'm crushing some leaves between my fingers and rolling my own zig.

The smoke is harsh and pleasantly warm. I hold my breath and let it saturate my lungs as I sit with my back against the wall, watching the sky darken to a deep purple behind the curved edge to the west. It's been over six months since they told me they found my sister dead at the East Gate, and my life ended that day. I still breathe, move, eat and shit, but I'm no longer alive. The Freak denied murdering her, said she found Mira and tried to help her before she realized Mira was dead, and no one could refute that. But all the violent men and women are already in custody, and everyone here knows where everyone else is. If someone had sneaked home bloody, someone else would have seen it. Half the street knows I'm sitting here smoking a zig right now, I'm doing it on the sly so I don't get my butt kicked. Geezer doesn't like to share his tobacco.

"Slaves, that's us," roars from the kitchen. Geezer is clearly in full swing. I hope he passes out soon, or I won't get much sleep. "We can't even walk our streets safely, did you hear that, freaking Board? Some get caught, some get away, is that fair?" The rocking chair creaks violently, and his guttural growl echoes between the tin facades of the houses.

"Some get medicine and some die. We've no value to you, huh? You're all a freaking pack."

My mother died of pneumonia a year ago, and just four months later Mira was murdered. There is nothing I can do about diseases that kill, and I believed the doctors when they said there was no medicine, but I promised myself to avenge Mira. There is this saying: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I have no idea where it comes from, but that is exactly how I feel. I'm going to smash that freak's temple with a big rock. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a skull for a skull.

Geezer's half-choked snore hits me in the face as I glance into the kitchen. The pota bottle has tipped over in his lap and sticky gray-brown drops are falling to the floor with little hollow plinks. I gulp down the last sip of burning oblivion, set the bottle on the table, and go to bed.



4.

Olympo is almost beautiful in the morning light. The sun rises in the east, but hasn't yet reached the huge velodrome that's our town. The high sides are called the Ledge, that's where the rich live. The really rich live at the top and have balconies as big as the houses in the Bottom. Vico lives halfway up the Ledge, but I have never been to his house or higher than one row up, where the school, hospital, kindergarten, jail and death facility are.

Angry voices and slamming doors fall silent as I leave the maze of shafts and stressed people and make my way to school. The morning is warm and the wind brings with it a scent of sun-warmed oranges and earth. Farmers sing outside on the plantation and the rustle of shovels echoes through the air. I don't feel like going to school. I never have, but the alternative is worse. The only thing that awaits me is a shitty job. The farmers don't sing because they are happy, they sing to survive.

My head is spinning from what happened yesterday. The Freak is in the Survivors. I have seen her in real life. She exists. Sometimes, when everything is so rotten I can't take it anymore, I go to the East Gate and talk to Mira. For

some reason, it feels like she is still there. As a woman hurries past me heading east, I hook up and try to enjoy her jiggling butt under her skirt, but not even that can improve my mood. She turns toward the food yard and I continue toward the gate. Mira's blood has long since seeped away, but I know where she died, and I squat down and lay my hand on the dry ground.

"What am I going to do, Mira?"

She doesn't answer. She never does, but maybe she hears me. I think she does. The sinking and rising edges of the velodrome glisten in the sun, and the dark shadow creeps further and further toward the center of town, making the red, yellow, and white flowers on the balconies shimmer. I will be late for school, but I don't care. Ahead of me is the dark alcove that leads outside. The barred gate stands ajar. It won't open or close, but is stuck somewhere in between. The Board hasn't bothered to fix it, nor should they. No one leaves here because it's so far away, and no one comes.

I go into the alcove, slowly lower myself with my back against the thick bars and close my eyes. In my mind I see Mira the morning before she died. She was standing at the stove making breakfast for us. Porridge. She had braided her dark curls into two pigtails, and her eyes smiled at me above her freckled cheeks. "Eat, Thorbi," she said, "pretend it's sugar beet porridge." I nodded and took the plate. The grief for my mother still burned, even though Mira did everything she could to cheer me up. "I'll be late tonight," she said, "I have to meet with Laban, we have important things to do."

"Again? You were gone for a long time yesterday and last week too."

"I know, I'm sorry, but it has to do with the escape. You know I can't tell you, not yet."

“When are you coming home?” I asked, because I didn’t like being alone when it was dark. “Are you coming before sundown?”

“No, I’ll be late, Thorbi. Don’t worry, I’ll take the big flashlight with me, I won’t get lost.”

My eyes fly open. Mira was on a mission, and the Freak was with her. Everyone wondered what she was doing down in the Bottom in the middle of the night, that’s nothing new, but now that Laban has accepted her into the group, everything changes. The Freak wouldn’t have just bumped into Mira and killed her for no reason, like everyone thinks. Did they know each other? That’s impossible. I claw my fingers into my scalp and groan. Laban knows the Freak and the Freak killed Mira. He has some explaining to do.

The lesson has been going on for a while when I arrive. I mumble something about a bad stomach and the teacher lets me get away with it. Lora nods for me to sit next to her, and I look at the words she has drawn in the sand. Do we have a spelling test today?

“Pour out the sand and get started, Thorbi,” Miss Morna says, handing me a scoop. “We are writing poetry. The topic is air.”

Oh, freak, I think, pouring the sand on the bench and taking the sharpened stick. Air, bear, fair “Does it have to rhyme, Miss Morna?”

For once I’m glad there is no paper in Olympo, or she would have forced us to write a whole page.



5.

For lunch I go with Lora and Spenser to the cafeteria, where they serve one of ten kinds of beans, corn, and potatoes. Spenser devours his food because he has to run an errand for his mother during the break, and I have some time to myself with Lora. We take our desserts outside and sit against the wall. If I lean forward, I can catch a glimpse of the alcove that leads to the East Gate.

“Imagine what this must have looked like back in the day,” Lora says, peeling her orange. “When the Bottom was empty, just a big open space where people did sports and the Ledge was full of spectators. There were big lights up there illuminating the spectacle.” She lets her finger wander between all the steel columns that surround the town, some with large spinning blades at the top. Those are our wind turbines.

“Hmm,” I say, though I’m not the least bit interested. “Hey Lora, I’ve been thinking about something. It has to do with Mira.”

Lora turns to me with raised eyebrows and stuffs a piece of orange in her mouth. “What?”

“She was found late at night during a mission.”

Lora nods. Everyone knows.

“But what are the chances that the Freak ran into Mira, killed her, and knew Laban at the same time?”

“I see what you mean,” Lora says. “It’s dubious.”

“It’s more than dubious.”

“Maybe Mira and Laban were together and the Freak was in love with Laban and killed Mira to win him over?” Lora almost drops the orange with excitement.

“Hardly. Mira wasn’t with anyone, I would have known that. It must have had something to do with the mission.”

“What was the mission?”

“I don’t know. But I’m going to ask Laban.”

“We have history with him and Mr. Herloff after lunch.”

“I know, but I’ll talk to him when school is over.”

Laban is interested in our history, so it’s no wonder he wants to be a history teacher. Our teachers not only have to know their subject, but also have a good memory. There are hardly any books left, only the memory of what once happened and was written down. We have a storyteller in Olympo, old Nard, who rattles off events in a strange, sing-song way, and Laban often sits with him. Today Mr. Herloff and Laban are talking about the old wars. It’s hard to concentrate. All my questions about Mira buzz around in my head like worried gnats, and Laban talks about how some countries had terrible weapons and larger armies than others. The only weapons I know are knives and axes, and the vision of huge blades mixes with the worried gnats and confuses me.

“That’s why the poor countries were knocked out,” Laban says, looking at Mr. Herloff, who nods. “Power would mean money, money to buy weapons and loyalty.”

Money? Does he mean gold? We pay with gold if we have any, otherwise we barter.

“Do you remember what started one of the last big wars?” asks Mr. Herloff. I raise my hand to say that some countries had bigger knives and axes, but fortunately Spenser comes to answer.

“Religion and races,” he says, and I realize that I must have missed a lot of what Laban and Mr. Herloff were talking about.

“Elaborate,” says Mr. Herloff.

“Well, apparently people believed in invisible higher powers,” says Spenser, “but they didn’t believe in the same higher powers, and they argued about whose higher power was the right one.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” says Mr. Herloff. “That’s what we call religion, and the invisible higher powers used to be called God, Allah, Buddha, Krishna, and so on. Keep talking, Spenser.”

“Different human races had different higher powers, God and Allah and these others, so there were wars all the time,” Spenser continues. It’s strange that two people who are such good friends as Spenser and I can be so different. Spenser is great at school and soaks up everything the teachers say, while I’m mostly trying to find meaning in life. That doesn’t work out so well.

“And then what happened?” asks Laban.

“Then some stepped forward and tried to save humanity. They banished invisible powers and all languages except English. They erased the borders of the countries, banished the different human races, and burned all the books and movies and, what’s the word, uh, sound recordings that weren’t in English.”

“That’s right, Spenser. They thought we would wipe each other out and render the planet useless if this continued. That’s why they forced the great sacrifice, as it’s called.

Is there anyone else who can tell us about the different human races?”

“Some of them had blue eyes,” someone shouts, and everyone thinks of the Freak. She is seventeen, a year older than Laban, but has no apprenticeship anywhere. She wasn’t allowed to go to school either.

“That’s right,” Mr. Herloff says. “And now we slide into another subject, science. Some had blue eyes and fair skin and light or red hair; others were dark and had black, very curly hair and brown eyes. Then there were some with slanting brown eyes and black hair, and others were more like us, with half to medium brown skin, dark brown or black hair, and brown eyes.”

“So our race won?” asks Lora.

“No,” says Mr. Herloff, “this is where science comes in. Haven’t you talked about genetics with Miss Kora?”

Spenser’s hand flies up. “We’re made of genes, and genes carry all our traits. For each trait, you get one gene from your mother and one gene from your father.”

“That’s right,” says Mr. Herloff. “And even though we have two genes for each trait, only one of them is visible because the genes are more or less dominant. The dominant gene is visible, but the other gene is just as present. If two parents pass the same non-dominant gene to their child, it can look very different from them. It can get blue eyes, for example.”

The class goes silent. What does he mean by that? Can someone have a gene for blue eyes that’s not visible because the gene for brown eyes is dominant?

“The same is true for skin color and hair color. We look like the dominant genes in our body, but we don’t know what trait the other gene has. Theoretically, we could be as blue-eyed, fair-skinned and blond as ... Or

maybe red-haired, green-eyed and freckled, although you can't tell."

Freckled? I run my fingers over the bridge of my nose and my cheeks, as if I can feel my freckles. Does Mr. Herloff mean I'm a freak, just like the Freak?

"Do we have genes like that, too?" asks Lora, looking horrified.

"No, of course not," Mr. Herloff reassures her. "We are the result of politically determined miscegenation, and it's been an enormous number of generations since the human races were mixed. Detailed guidelines for permissible skin, hair and eye pigmentation were established and strictly followed for a long time to eliminate all illegal predispositions. The risk of having an abnormal gene is one in a million."

Is the Freak one in a million?

"This lesson slips into many subjects," Laban says suddenly, as if to break the interest in genetics and our appearance. I'm not surprised, because Laban doesn't look like us either. He has a hawk nose, his cheekbones are high and pronounced, and his eyes are wide apart. He doesn't look like anyone, but at least he has the right color.

"... for example," Laban says, and I realize I missed the beginning. Again. "Do you remember the continents?"

The continents? A faint memory of two circles drawn in the sand comes to mind. Our globe is a big round ball with big seas and land masses on it, and long ago the names of the different land masses had meaning.

"They are called Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Oceania, and Antarctica."

Words, they are just words.

"Different human races lived on different continents and had different religions, and each considered their race

and religion to be correct, which inevitably led to war,” Laban says.

“They even fought each other within the same religion because people thought their interpretation was right. Hence the prohibition of races and religions before we wiped each other out completely,” Mr. Herloff says. “In my opinion, that was an honorable sacrifice, and as far as scholars remember, it was successful. But in the very last war, civilization fell apart. We are probably the only people left on our planet, so we have to reproduce. The entire existence of humanity rests on our shoulders.”

“Maybe there are more people out there,” Keidra says quietly, without raising her hand. Lora, Spenser, and I wince, we have to hold back our thoughts, and Laban’s body tenses beside Mr. Herloff.

“Some people think so,” Mr. Herloff chuckles, “but what are the odds? We have been here in Olympos for over eighty years without anyone coming. Unfortunately, we are probably left alone. Alone on a broken planet, far from the decay that ravaged the world, or we wouldn’t have survived the last catastrophe.”

This is where I stop listening. I know all about the wars and the refugees who landed here eighty years ago, and I still believe that there are people out there in the real world who have forgotten us here behind the impassable distance. But part of me has begun to doubt the real world. What if it’s like Olympos? What if we set out at the risk of our lives, only to end up in a system that’s not a bit different and where most people are poor slaves, just like geezer roars that we are. In that case, it’s meaningless. Then it’s all pointless, and you might as well throw yourself off one of the tall steel columns and be done with it, as Mira did, according to the Board.

When the last lesson is over, I go to the teachers' room to wait for Laban. One by one, the teachers disappear, smiling in surprise when they see me. They aren't used to me staying a minute longer than I have to. Before the door closes behind Miss Pemba, the agriculture teacher, I see Laban and Mr. Herloff sitting at a table. Laban says, "... existential questions that you just can't blurt out," and Mr. Herloff looks annoyed.

"I'm convinced that the scholars have made the right decision, Laban, and you are not the right *man* to question it." He says "man" as if he wants to say "boy" but doesn't dare to.

"So you mean that people's unique qualities and thoughts aren't valuable?" asks Laban.

"For thousands of years, humans have shown that they cannot hold unique characteristics and thoughts within the framework of peace and justice. If our species was to survive, we had no choice but to incorporate them into a single race in which external conflicts such as language and religion are eradicated. What you are proposing may well be considered criminal. Long ago it was even punishable by death to think as you do, I hope you are aware of that."

The door closes again, and I don't hear Laban's reply. When they finally part, Mr. Herloff nods at me expressionlessly, but Laban frowns, wondering what I want. I pull him out of the school building and look around for eavesdroppers.

"What's wrong?" asks Laban, leaning against the warm wall of the house.

"There is one thing I want to know," I say as I study his profile, wondering what races are in his genes and if they are very different from mine.

“What do you want to know?”

I tell him about Mira and the Freak and that I don't think it was just a coincidence that they met outside the East Gate that night.

“So?”

“What was Mira doing? And why was the Freak there? You have to tell me, Laban.”

“I can't.”

“What do you mean you can't? You sent Mira on a mission, and she died doing it. Is that why you don't blame the Freak? You feel just as responsible as her, the real killer, don't you?”

“Her name is Dora, and I can't talk to you about it. Even if I could, this isn't the place. Everyone can hear us.”

“There is no one here.”

“You are so naive,” Laban groans. “Those who want to spy on us won't show themselves.”

“I want an answer, Laban.”

“And you will get one, but not now. I dare not reveal anything, not until ... you know what.”

Before what? The escape?

“How can you be sure *she* won't trap us and betray us to the Board?”

“Because Dora has to get out of here, Thorbi. More than we do. Stop worrying.”

When I get home, the overseers have taken geezer. Some of the neighbors have had enough of his yelling and reported him to the Board.