

ONE BLOOD. ONE BREED. ONE REIGN.

m^{the} Master race



L. HAGENSEN

PUREBRED II

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THE MASTER RACE



DORA'S BOOK

which begins three years before Thorbi's
book *Escaping Olympo*



1.

A soft snore sounds from Uncle's bedroom as I creep through the house to the hallway and the door that leads outside. I make sure my hair is well hidden and pull the hood as far down my face as I can. It's dark outside and the risk of someone seeing my eyes is small, but I don't dare take a chance.

The day I don't want to live anymore, I can walk down the street in broad daylight without a hood and look everyone in the eye. That would solve my problems in a very concrete way, but I'm not there yet. I don't want to die, even if I can't live like this much longer. I have to get away from here.

The biggest challenge is getting off the Ledge. Even though it's late, people are out and about and I don't dare face them even with my head down. The risk is far too great that they will wonder who I am. The Bottom, with its many winding little sheds and dark, narrow streets where most people walk with their heads down, is something else. In the Bottom, I almost dare to pretend I'm normal. I see rascals smoking zigs, kids fighting, and lovers making out in secret, casting anxious glances in all directions.

The degenerates float past me like confused souls in their skeletal bodies; I wonder how they see the world through those saucer-sized pupils. A boy and a girl are standing by one of the small houses near the East Gate, talking. I recognize them. The boy lives in the house, I think his parents are dead, but he seems like a person who takes care of himself. His black hair is long and always tied in a ponytail, and his nose is slightly crooked. The girl is the most beautiful thing in my world, the one I dream about in my lonely room in my house on the Ledge. She has curly brown hair and golden eyes, and her cheeks are full of freckles. Her name is Mira; I have heard the boy call her that several times. Mira. Even her name is beautiful.

If I had just kept to the shadows, I could have stopped and watched her for a while, but the moon lights up the narrow road and I'm walking in its glow. All I can do is look down and hope they don't react to my jacket as I walk past them. It's far too clean for the Bottom. I slip into the dark aisle that leads to the gate, squeeze past the half-open bars, and take a deep breath. Free. As free as I can be. If I don't turn around and see the arched walls of Olympo's velodrome, I can pretend I'm on my way out of here. The world spreads out before me, empty and lonely. Beyond the emptiness, life begins. Of that I'm sure. We can't be the only ones left, as the Board wants to impose on us.

"Hello," someone says behind me. Someone? I would recognize that voice anywhere. That's her. The girl. Mira.

"Hey," I say, amazed that I can get anything out at all with my stiff lips. How am I supposed to get past her without her seeing my face? Go, I urge her quietly; you've said hello now; just go. Go home.

"I have seen you around a few times. Aren't you out here pretty often?"

I swallow and nod.

“But I don’t recognize you. Or ... I don’t recognize your clothes. You don’t go to school, do you?”

I shake my head, feeling her presence behind me as clearly as if she had placed her hands on my shoulders.

“So you are older than me? Do you live up on the Ledge? Are you a doctor or something?”

I decide to nod, because I do live on the Ledge, even if I’m not a doctor. Or something.

“It’s beautiful here,” she says, and even though I can only see straight ahead under my oversized hood, I can feel her standing next to me. “It looks magical.” Her arm shoots forward and I can see her wagging her index finger toward the moonlit wasteland and windswept bushes.

“Hmm,” I agree.

“Who are you?” She appears in my field of vision and I look down in horror, hoping she hasn’t noticed, but I hear her gasp. “Freak, it’s you.”

Freak. Yes, that’s exactly who I am.

“Oh. Please forgive me; I didn’t mean to say ... I’m so sorry.”

I close my eyes, but it’s too late; she has already seen them. Before I can move, she grabs me by the sleeve.

“Don’t go. Please don’t go. I won’t tell anyone.”

It’s completely unreal. Here I am, standing with her, Mira, in the moonlight outside the town, just as I have imagined a thousand times, and I’m completely terrified and excited at the same time. More terrified than excited, though. If I make it out of here, at least I will have more stuff to dream about.

“I think your eyes are beautiful,” she says, “a little scary, but very beautiful. Can I see them again?”

As if I were standing on the edge of the velodrome

and had only to lean forward to plunge to my death, I open my eyes and meet hers. We look at each other, and she suddenly smiles and becomes, if possible, even more beautiful.

“Incredible,” she murmurs, “blue eyes.”

When she raises her index finger again, I take a step back for safety’s sake, and she laughs. “Hello,” she says, “my name is Mira.”

“Dora,” I say. Of course she already knows that. Everyone knows the Freak’s name.

“Hi Dora, it’s very ... exciting to finally meet you. You don’t go to school.” A statement. Of course I don’t go to school, and Mira realizes she just said something stupid. “Which I think is a shame,” she says, trying to salvage the situation.

“My uncle is my teacher,” I say, so she won’t think I’m ignorant.

“Of course he is. Hey, can’t you take your hood off?”

This time I take a step back out of pure survival instinct.

“Okay, that was stupid of me. How about I come to your house?”

“To my house?” Did I mention that I read books? There is not much else to do when you are alone most of the time, and there is probably not a single book in Olympos that I haven’t read at least fifty times. One of them is set in a zoo where almost all the animals in the world are caged as a pastime for curious people. The zoo where I live is pretty unvisited.

“Yes ... if you want. Can you bring friends home?”

“Friends?” The word has a strange connotation and a form I have never known.

“Friends,” she says, smiling, and how could I say no?

A few anxious weeks pass before I muster the courage

to ask my uncle if I can bring a friend home. He gets angry and somehow manages to pry everything out of me about my nightly walks in the Bottom and outside the East Gate.

“Out walking?” he yells so loudly it rings in my ears. “Have you lost your mind?”

“But these walls are driving me crazy,” I shout back. “Crazy, did you hear that?”

“What do you think will happen if the overseers see you, Dora? The agreement I have with Morman doesn’t include any walks. You are only protected in my house. If the regular people down in the Bottom get their hands on you” What they might do, Uncle apparently dare not say. “They wouldn’t even be punished,” he concludes a little more calmly.

After the lecture, he at least agrees to let Mira come here. Partly to check on her, I suppose, and partly because he thinks I will stay home in the evenings if I have a friend over from time to time. He is dead wrong about that. I will never let myself be locked up.

Mira lives in one of the tiny tin houses in the middle of the Bottom. Like almost every other house there, her garden, where various vegetables grow, is surrounded by a low, rusty tin plank. I know this because I have stood in front of her house many times. Tonight, however, I am not here to spy from my usual hideout by the broken plank across the street. For once, my case is legitimate.

Not much happens in this part of town, most are tired farmers walking by with their backs bent where I hang out in the shade. Mira’s parents haven’t come home yet,

though it's late, and there are no dark-haired heads in the only window facing the street. My back slides over the broken plank as if by itself and I lean my forehead against my knees, hoping her parents will come soon so she can leave her little brother and go outside.

"Dora?"

I jerk back so hard that I bang my head against the plank. Mira squats in front of me with a confused look in her brown eyes. "Hi," I gasp, as if sitting asleep against a broken plank in the Bottom is perfectly normal. Maybe it is.

"Thorbi said there was a dead degenerate out here. He was so worried I had to go check it out."

"Thorbi?" I say, thinking that I have sunk as low as I can now. A drugged, dead degenerate? But no, to most people in Olympos, a drugged, dead degenerate is still a few rungs higher on the social ladder than the town freak.

"My little brother. Mom and Dad are working overtime. I'm the babysitter. Were you waiting for me outside the East Gate?"

How can she be so calm and talk like we are two normal people? "I was ... my uncle says it's okay. You can come to me," I blurt out, looking uncomprehendingly at her outstretched hand as she stands up.

"Fine, come on, I'll help you up." She grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet, but she doesn't let go. She just stands there holding my hand in hers as she tries in vain to see my face under the protective hood. "When can I come? Is tomorrow too early? Mom and Dad shouldn't be working overtime then; it's their turn to work normal hours."

"Tomorrow would be great," I say, hoping Uncle isn't going to a meeting or something, and flatly says no.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then. What time?” She lets go of my hand, and I miss her already.

“At seven? Can you do seven?”

Tomorrow at seven is a done deal, and I go home like a confused degenerate, but high on anxiety and longing instead of weird mushrooms.



2.

If I felt like an animal in a cage before, it's nothing compared to what I feel now. Uncle has prepared a light meal and set the table where before there were only the few Board members who don't believe that what I'm suffering from is contagious. From the way he arranged the plates and glasses, I gather that he wants Mira to sit next to me, facing him, so that he can observe her reaction when he asks a question. I wonder if she knows what's coming as I pace up and down in my cage waiting for seven o'clock.

There is a mirror in our house. It hangs on the wall in Uncle's bedroom. For obvious reasons, I haven't looked in it since I was little, but now I almost want to go into his room and look at myself. I know the hair color, I see it every time I braid my hair, and the skin color lights up at me as soon as I raise my hand. But I haven't seen my eyes in over five years, when I finally realized what a freak I am. I couldn't bring myself to claw them out, and settled for cutting off all my hair. Uncle was sad when he saw what I had done, and being bald made me feel even

more exposed, so I let my hair grow and have avoided the mirror ever since.

There is a knock at the door. I jump up and feel sweat break out in my armpits. I'm just as terrified and excited as I was the magical night Mira and I first met. Uncle opens the door, I hear a polite murmur and see them shake hands, and then she steps into my world and all air disappears. As if in a trance, I sit down next to her at the table and wonder if they understand that I am not only a freak on the outside, but also on the inside.

Only on Mira's third visit does Uncle let us go to my room. She has his consent and I'm not surprised. They talked a lot during our meals and he seems to appreciate her honesty. She never tries to figure out what he might want to hear, but says what she thinks. For someone as important as Uncle, that's probably refreshing.

"Finally," Mira says as I close the door behind us. She looks at me like no one has ever looked at me before. "I'm not complaining, because I've never eaten anything better than what I get here, but I want to see you."

See, or study? A little uncomfortable, I sit down on the bed. Mira looks around before sitting down in the chair next to my desk. "Are you allowed to have books in your room?"

"Yes, of course, I'm reading them."

Mira shrugs. "I thought I was going to faint when I first came here and saw all the books on the shelf in the room where we eat. Luckily, I've had time to get used to it, or I would have passed out when I saw those." She points to my books.

Suddenly I see my room through Mira's eyes. Her house is small, so small that it can only consist of the kitchen with the window facing the alley and two small bedrooms in the back. My room is big enough for a bed, a desk, and a closet, and the room where we eat and Uncle works is probably three times that size and has dining room furniture, bookshelves, a big desk, and two armchairs. They don't even have running water or toilets in the Bottom, they have to go to a watering hole to get water and to one of the public toilet stalls when they go to the bathroom or take a shower.

"Don't you understand?" she says, impatient with my lack of response. "There are no books in the Bottom. And the ones I've seen at school are locked in the teachers' lounge." She picks up a book and weighs it before carefully opening it. "This is the first time I've ever held a book in my hand."

I don't know what to say. "Do you want to borrow it?" I blurt out before I can come to my senses.

"Are you crazy? No one knows I'm here. I could never go home with a book."

"You can read it while you are here."

"Thank you, that's very kind, but I would rather be with you." She hesitates for a moment before sitting down next to me on the bed. "It's hard to talk with your uncle sitting there staring at me," she whispers, pulling up my shirtsleeve and lightly stroking my arm with her finger. "You have such incredibly fair skin."

Warmth spreads across my skin, as if her fingertip is glowing. Part of me wants to pull down my sleeve, another part wants her to never stop. Her hand leaves my arm and moves to my hair. "Almost like gold," she whispers, pulling out the elastic and loosening the braid. Her fingers

tickle the back of my neck, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine. "It's amazing. Do you know what race you are?"

"Huh?" The spell is broken. But what did I expect?

"Do you know what race you belong to, I mean?"

"The human race, of course." I push her hand away and braid my hair with my face averted. Blood pulses under my skin as I bend down and search for the rubber band.

"You know what I mean." Mira puts on an indulgent smile and waves the hair band in the air. As I try to take it, she grabs my braid and gently wraps the band into place.

"I know what you think you mean, Mira," I say, trying to remember the words Uncle said many years ago. "There is only one human race. When they banned the races and forced this mixture that makes everyone look the same, they didn't ban the different races, they banned some colors."

Mira frowns. "What do you mean?"

"There are animals, or at least there were animals, in the outside world. I have read a lot about them."

"We talked about animals in school." Mira sounds offended, as if she thinks I'm throwing all the books I have read in her face. Maybe I am. "Horses and dogs and cows and everything."

"Okay, let's use horses as an example." Should I get up and sit in the chair or stay on the bed with her? Is everything ruined now? It doesn't matter; if she is just here to look at the freak, she might as well leave. "There are, or were, I don't know, many breeds of horses. Let's take the Thoroughbred horse. It could have many different colors. Certain colors weren't allowed, so these horses were selectively bred until the illegal colors were gone. People were like Thoroughbred horses. They are the same

breed, but with different colors. When the heads of state decided that only one color was allowed, they got rid of the other colors by selective breeding. It was all about color breeding, not racial breeding.”

“Oh,” Mira says. “I never thought of it that way. But you are right, the only thing that separates you from everyone else is your colors. And they are amazing.” She smiles this incredible smile, and I feel the corners of my mouth pull up and we laugh. It’s nice to laugh at the worst thing that can happen to a person, the wrong colors. It’s even nicer when she leans forward and touches my lips with hers.

“That’s forbidden,” I breathe into her and I feel her nod.

“It’s not like when you’re not mixed race,” she bites my lip gently, “and it’s only forbidden in Olympo by the Board. It can’t be that dangerous.”

I taste her lips and run my tongue over hers, wanting to warn her. To tell her she doesn’t know what she is doing, that there is a risk to getting close to a person who hasn’t been close to anyone since she was old enough to eat by herself. But words mean nothing anymore; I press my body as close to hers as I can, thinking that none of the kisses I have read about even come close to this one.



3.

Winter moves leisurely toward spring and I live in a rare euphoria filled with Mira's whole being. She has invaded my life and I can no longer open a book. I don't remember the letters.

"How can something so wonderful be forbidden?" I whisper, pressing my lips to her chest.

"Ouch, don't bite me." Mira laughs and tries to lift my head. "Forbidden? Be like me and don't think about it."

"Difficult. I think about you all the time."

Mira runs her fingers through my hair, forcing me to look her in the eye. "What do you think we should do?"

Escape.

I have toyed with that thought before. If I stay here, trapped in Uncle's house in the top row of the Ledge, I won't survive my twentieth birthday. Whatever the Board says, I believe there are other people in the world. People who look like me. Freaks. With them, I wouldn't be abnormal.

"We are going to get out of here, Mira, and I have a plan. We are going to build a ship that sails on sand. We have three years to figure out how to do that." In three

years we will be eighteen years old. That's when the Board will decide who Mira will live with. One thing is clear. It won't be with me.

Mira pulls my face close to hers and we breathe the same air. "I'm going to run away with you," she whispers, "one day. Now stop talking and do something."

When Uncle comes home, my bed is made and Mira and I are sitting in the dining room, fully dressed, reading a book.

"Hey girls, have you eaten yet?"

"The stew from yesterday," I say, quickly closing the book. "There's some for you, too." Uncle enters the kitchen and I find the page we were just studying.

"But how can we build one?" Mira whispers.

"I don't know. Not yet." The ship spreads all over the pages of the book, bobbing like a pea pod in boiling water on the stormy waves.

"And there is no water here, just sand," Mira continues.

"We need to put wheels on it."

"Wheels? Where are we going to get them? The only thing that has wheels here are the wheelbarrows, and those wheels are way too small."

"Do you have to be so negative?" I slam the book closed and angrily put it back on the shelf.

"Negative?" Mira's eyebrows fly up. "I'm just being realistic, Dora" She stops talking as Uncle sits down at the table with a steaming plate of cabbage stew.

"So," he says, blowing on the hot food. "What are you learning in school, Mira? Do you ever talk about democracy?"

The next time Mira comes, she walks around the room like a nervous chicken, pinching the tablecloth and straightening the pictures. I'm dying to know what it is, but Uncle is talkative and won't let us sneak into my bedroom.

"Shall we play Five in a Row?" I suggest.

"Good idea," Uncle says. "I'll hit the winner."

Mira leans over the game board when Uncle finally leaves us to go to the kitchen. "Dora, I want to ask you something."

"Okay?" I say, disappointed. Does she want to talk? That's not what I thought.

"Tea, girls?" calls Uncle and when we answer yes, water bubbles out of the tap. Mira seizes the opportunity.

"Can I tell Laban about you?"

"No," I exclaim. "Who is Laban?"

"My best friend."

The boy with the ponytail? Best friend? That was more than I knew.

"Best friend besides you," Mira clarifies.

"What, are you ... have you been together?"

"Like you and me? No, of course not. We are friends. He is not like the others at school. You can talk to Laban about important things."

"Why do you want to talk to him about me? About us?"

"Because you make me happy and he understands that something is going on. And because he can help us with the sailing ship. He is wise."

"Do you think we should take him with us when we escape?"

"Yes."

“But what does he think of freaks?”

“Don’t call yourself that,” Mira whispers. “You are the most beautiful there is. Laban will think so, too. He has no prejudices.”

A loud clatter reveals that Uncle and the tea tray are on their way.

“What did you read at school today?” he asks, setting out teacups and grilled apple slices. Why is he so interested in what Mira is learning in school? Is he trying to get ideas for my education, or is he just making small talk?

“Thank you,” Mira says, accepting her cup. “I mentioned the democracy thing you talked about. That’s very interesting. But Mr. Herloff cut me off when I started comparing democracy to the rule of Olympo, so we didn’t get anywhere. I was talking to my friend Laban about....”

“Five in a row,” I interrupt, placing my last stone on the board. “I win.”

As we finish our tea and Mira and I head for the front door to say goodbye, I whisper to her that it’s okay. She can tell Laban about me. I will say yes to anything if it gets me out of here.

The next day, my throat is swollen and the fever is ringing in my ears.

“I’m afraid that’s what happens when you live in isolation, dear child,” Uncle says, trying to get me to eat.

“I want to die,” I groan, pushing the plate away.

“Everyone who comes here brings bacteria they are immune to. You and Mira must have been sitting too close, whispering secrets. Try to drink some tea, at least.”

Sitting too close and whispering secrets? If only he knew.

“I will ask Porter to come. I’m sure he will find out what’s wrong with you.” Porter is the best doctor in Olympo. Holding high office has its advantages.

Porter prescribes plenty of fluids, sleep, and a foul-smelling herbal decoction. The days drag on and slowly I get better, though I'm dying of boredom. It's not just Mira I long for. Shamefully, I miss my secret walks in the Bottom and spying under my deep hood. Mira has no idea that I track her movements almost every night when she is not here.

"Eat please, Dora," Uncle says, not daring to leave me alone to go to work at the Board.

"I can't," I say, forcing water and medicine down my throat.

Mira comes to visit. I hear her and Uncle outside the room clinking teacups and talking. He only lets her see me for a few minutes before she leaves, fearing she will wear me out. Wear me out? I would rather die of Mira's company than boredom.

One evening she sits on the edge of my bed and runs her finger over my cheek.

"I talked to Laban," she whispers. "He wants to build the sailing ship with us and escape from Olympo. He says it's a brilliant idea, Dora."

So Laban wants to escape with us. I don't know if I think that's good or bad. If he can help us with the sailing ship, that's good, I suppose, because we probably can't do it ourselves. The fever makes me dizzy. But not dizzy enough not to wonder what Mira is rambling about when she stops talking about escaping and slips into topics like democracy and the will of the people. She sounds like an echo of Uncle, and a vague unease makes me turn away from her and stare at the wall. Mira thinks that it's the fever that makes me strange.

A few days later, I realize I'm hungry and crawl laboriously out of bed. Pans clatter in the kitchen and

Uncle hums an old ditty about unrequited love and death. He sounds like the harmless uncle he pretends to be, but I know better.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” he admonished me when I caught him. I was eleven years old and knew no one. Who was I going to tell? The books? “What I’m doing is dangerous, Dora. Can I trust you?”

Uncle can trust me. I didn’t even show Mira when I opened my soul and let her in. He, on the other hand, told her. Of that I’m sure.

“Are you awake?” he says, as I enter the kitchen. “Let me check on you.” He puts his hand on my forehead. “The fever has gone down. Are you hungry?”

“Yes.” It feels like I haven’t eaten in two weeks. I probably haven’t, now that I think about it.

“Good, sit in the armchair and I’ll bring you something to eat. Wrap a blanket around yourself.”

I lean my head against the back of the chair with my eyes closed, remembering that night almost four years ago. Murmured, excited voices woke me and I listened at my door until the voices faded and the front door closed. Uncle was shocked when I confronted him, stuffing a mouthful of pota down his throat in sheer horror.

“Why do you want to overthrow the Presidium?”

Uncle pointed at me and coughed. “What are you doing up in the middle of the night? You weren’t eavesdropping, were you?”

“Yes. Who were you talking to?”

The Presidium is the decision-making body of the Board. In it sit the powerful men and women who pull the strings and make the Board dance. There aren’t many of them, the Presidium wolves, and I’ve only met two besides my uncle. They are Morman, the head of the Presidium,

and Miss Otilia. Every time she looks at Uncle, she gets something greedy in her eyes. Fortunately, she detests me more than she desires him.

Uncle told me everything that night; he had no choice. “Never say a word about the doctors and teachers who were here last night,” he admonished me. “If the Presidium finds out what we are up to, we will be executed. But what we are doing is important. The system here has become totalitarian. The Presidium used to protect everyone’s survival. Now it protects only itself. The Olympians aren’t idiots. They can make important decisions and have the right to have a say. The problem is the people need to wake up. They should free themselves from their shackles, unite and fight for democracy.”

I didn’t understand much of what he was saying then, but I do now. And Uncle did wake Mira up; I’m pretty sure of that.



4.

Mira stretches and giggles as I let my fingers travel over her belly to her side, where she is most ticklish.

“We need to get dressed, your uncle will be here any minute.”

“He won’t be here for a while,” I say after glancing at the wall clock. “But we need to talk, Mira.”

“I know. The sailing ship. Laban is trying to figure out where we can get fabric big enough for sails.”

It wasn’t the sailing ship I had in mind, but we could take that first. “Can’t we sew a lot of blankets together?”

“Even the blankets on the Ledge aren’t durable enough.” She grabs my blanket and pulls hard, causing a disturbing tear in the loosely woven fabric. I nod and pretend I didn’t hear the “even the blankets on the Ledge” part.

“And it’s something else” Mira falls silent, as if she knows I won’t like what she has to say. “We need Vico.”

“Vico? We don’t need that rude bully for anything.”

“Why do you say that? You haven’t even met him, Dora.”

Met him, no. But I have seen him. I have seen tall, broad-shouldered Vico, with his dark, short-cropped hair

and confident smile, frolicking around Mira and, well, I don't know what he said to her, since I could only watch her from a distance, but even an idiot could see he is crazy about her.

"It's *my* plan." I hear how childish I sound. "You wanted Laban, and that's fine with me. Vico isn't okay."

"Stop that, will you?" Mira snaps, picking up her pants from the floor. "Your plan, huh? It was hardly a plan when you were alone. It was just you and an idea you had. Good luck escaping on your own, Dora. Do you know how many have tried and died in the process?"

Mira is so angry that she presses both legs into the same pant leg, which infuriates her even more. She curses like a dung worker before she manages to tuck each leg where it belongs.

"What's wrong?" she asks when I don't answer. "What are you thinking about?"

"That I wish I didn't love you so much." That's true. Sometimes it was easier to be alone. At least then I didn't have to worry about being left behind.

Mira is silent as she picks up her shirt from the floor and pulls it over her head. "That's what I wished, too. That I didn't love you so much, I mean," she hurries to say when she sees the look on my face. "It would have been much easier to be in love with Vico. I'm not stupid, I know he is in love with me, and it's not impossible the Board will let us live together. But I want you, only you, and that's freaking ... sorry, that sucks."

"Why do we have to involve Vico?" I watch her frustratedly smooth her hair, which is crackling from static electricity from her shirt, and wonder if she is still all mine.

"Because he is the son of one of the inventors and will become one of them when his apprenticeship is over. He

is super smart about technical things, and we need him when we build the sailing ship. He is the only one who can make the blueprint and design the wheels.”

“Are you sure he wants to leave here? He is doing pretty well now, isn’t he?”

“If he thinks that’s the only way to get me, he will,” Mira says, standing up.

“What do you mean? What are you going to do?”

”Just let him think he and I are together. It doesn’t mean anything, Dora, don’t worry about it. I have to go home now and do my homework.” She leans over and kisses me gently. “I only want you, you know that.”

Then she is gone and I can’t ask the other thing I’m wondering about. The thing I suspect.

The front door has barely closed behind Mira when it opens again. I hurry to get dressed and hear Uncle call out that he is home.

“Was that Mira I saw leaving here?” he asks, hanging up his jacket.

“Yes, she came to visit, but she had homework to do,” I say, eyeing him furtively. His disappointed expression confirms my suspicions. “How so? Did you want to talk to her?”

“No, no,” Uncle mutters, like the liar he has become, and walks into his bedroom without looking me in the eye.

When do they meet, Uncle and Mira? It can’t just be at dinner, even though their discussions heat up over plates and bowls, while I want nothing more than to thank him for the food and drag Mira to my room. An increasingly engaged Mira, I might add. Suddenly a fire

of righteousness burns within her, and when Uncle goes to one of his secret meetings and we finally get to sleep together, she wants to discuss how wrong it is that people don't have more say.

"Like you, for example," she says, "It's crazy that you are not accepted just because you are blue-eyed and light-skinned."

Try to change that, I think.

"And the fact that we have to live with and have children with those the Board has chosen," she continues, encouraged by her own words. "That's terribly undemocratic."

"But it's because of the danger of inbreeding," I say.

"You should still have the opportunity to participate in the decision." Mira doesn't give up. "Besides, there shouldn't be a ban on same-sex sexual exchange."

Here I raise my eyebrows. "Same-sex sexual exchange? That was the most off-putting term for what we do that I have ever heard. You don't have to take your clothes off; I don't feel like it anymore."

Silence breaks out between us.

"Mira," I hesitate. "Don't you want to escape anymore?" Mira used to be all excited about the sailing ship, but now all she wants to talk about is democracy, and the last time she was here she had a hickey on her chest. I didn't dare ask her about it.

"Of course I do." She blinks at me calculatingly. "And actually, I'm in the mood for a same-sex sexual exchange, so you can take your clothes off."

Maybe Uncle isn't indoctrinating Mira, and maybe everything about Vico is very innocent. Maybe I'm brown-eyed after all.