

# THE RISING

THE BRANDED SEASON BOOK TWO



JO RICCIONI



PANTERA  
PRESS



**PANTERA  
PRESS**

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, dialogue and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, firms, events or locales is coincidental.*

First published in 2023 by Pantera Press Pty Limited.  
www. PanteraPress.com

Text Copyright © Jo Riccioni, 2023.  
Jo Riccioni has asserted her moral rights to be identified as the author of this work.

Design and Typography Copyright © Pantera Press Pty Limited, 2023  
®Pantera Press, three-slashes colophon device, *sparkling imagination, conversation & change* are registered trademarks of Pantera Press Pty Limited. Lost the Plot is a trademark of Pantera Press Pty Limited.

This book is copyright, and all rights are reserved.  
We welcome your support of the author's rights, so please only buy authorised editions.

Without the publisher's prior written permission, and without limiting the rights reserved under copyright, none of this book may be scanned, reproduced, stored in, uploaded to or introduced into a retrieval or distribution system, including the internet, or transmitted, copied or made available in any form or by any means (including digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, sound or audio recording, and text-to-voice). This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent recipient.

Please send all permission queries to:  
Pantera Press, P.O. Box 1989, Neutral Bay, NSW, Australia 2089 or [info@PanteraPress.com](mailto:info@PanteraPress.com)

A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

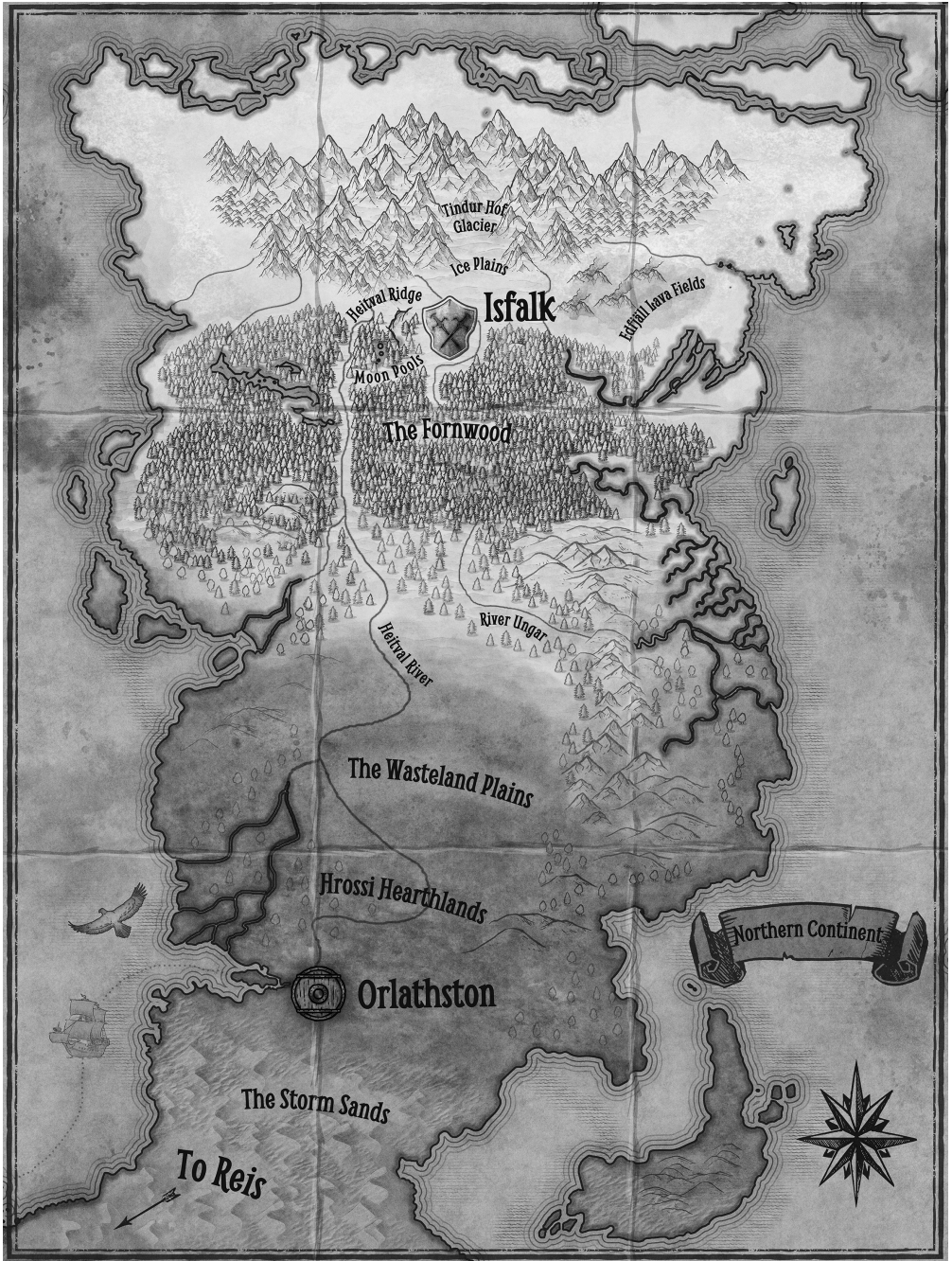
ISBN 978-0-6454985-7-8 (Paperback)  
ISBN 978-0-6456246-3-2 (eBook)

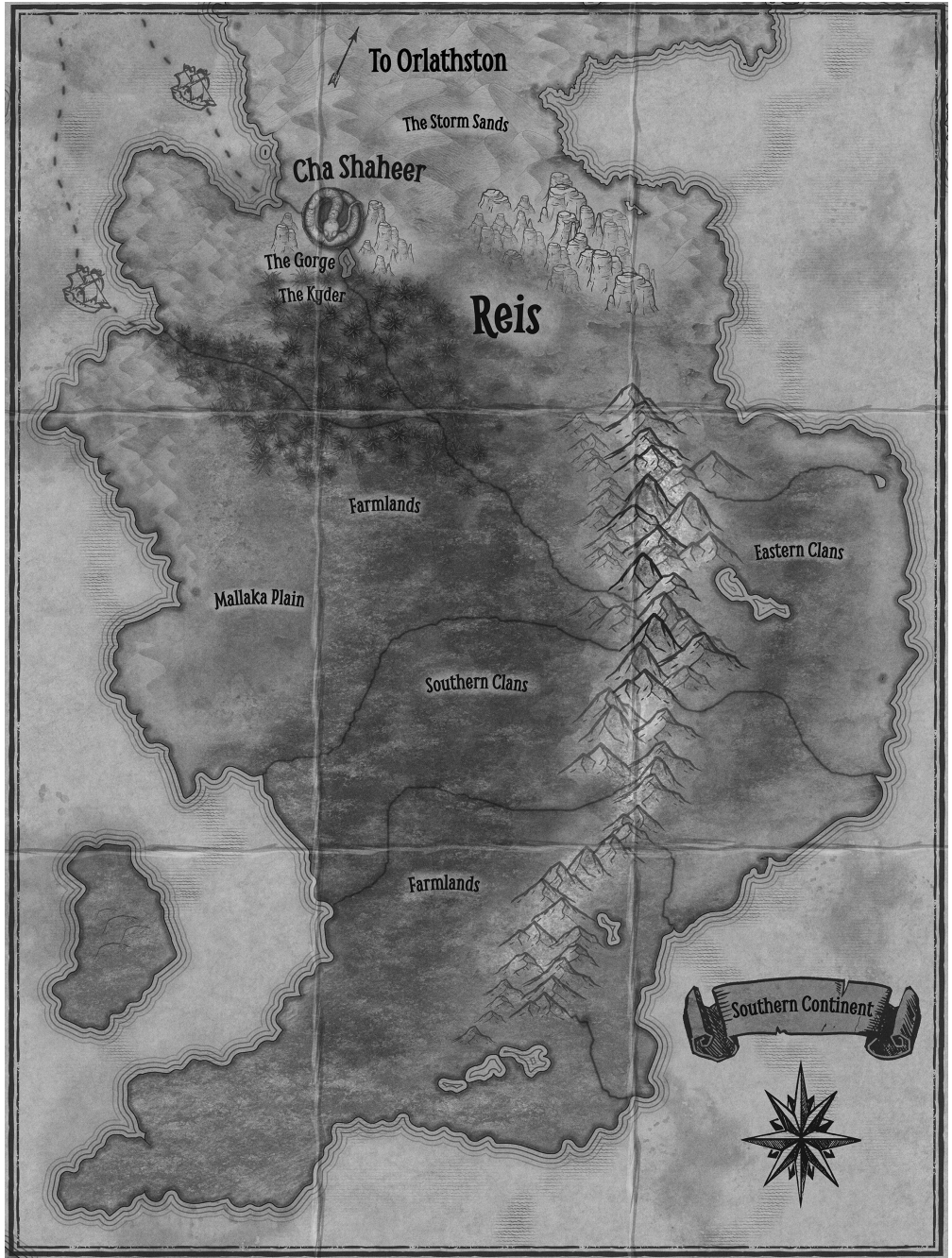
Cover Design: Debra Billson  
Cover Images: Shutterstock/Peratek, Shutterstock/AlinArt, Shutterstock/babyuka  
Publisher: Lex Hirst  
Project Editor: Kirsty van der Veer  
Editor: Anna Blackie  
Proofreader: Abigail Nathan  
Typesetting: Kirby Jones  
Author Photo: Dorte Kjaerulff  
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

*For Uncle Luciano Riccioni, my first history teacher and  
tour guide to the wonders of the world*





PART ONE:

REIS

# THE FOOL AND THE STORM

*B*e careful of the boy. He's a good soul born of bad. Know that if he betrays you, he will break his own heart doing it.

The buck at the water's edge is no bigger than a fleet fox. His thin antlers curve like the ribs of a slum kid back in Isfalk. He raises a wet nose, one delicate foreleg ready to run, as if he can sense me in the dense foliage downstream. I close my eyes, reach again for the sound of his tripping pulse. But I can't seem to latch on – can't subdue its beat to my own as I usually can when I hunt. Sweat beads on my lip, and my mark on the beast falters. I could blame this bastard bow, the riser far larger than my weapon in Isfalk, its draw-length longer. I could blame this suffocating heat, the humidity of the Reis jungle that hangs so close it feels like even my eyeballs are sweating in their sockets, blurring my vision. But there's only one honest reason I can't channel my skill this morning.

*He will break his own heart.*

*His own heart.*

*His own.*



I crack my neck and feel the release roll down my spine. *Fec's sake, Nara, get a grip.* Lifting my chin, I line up again. The bow strains, string creaking, but even as my fingers release, I know my aim is wide. The buck rears as the arrow nicks its rump, but almost simultaneously there's the soft pock of another shot. The deer topples into the shallows, heart-shot quivering long after its body is still.

I spin around, searching for the archer. Boots crush the sultry tick of the undergrowth, and the jungle shivers and parts. The wrangler wears a sleeveless gilet of soft leather, bronze arms dewy with sweat. Loose linen pants match the sand scarves draped around his neck, and rings of gold clamp his black curls, picking out the gilded tooling on his leather boots, the scabbard of his curved sword. He couldn't appear any more different from the stable hand I met mere months ago, bundled in patchy furs as he exercised his sled dogs across the Isfalki tundra. Now, he might be a prince of Reis stepped from his hunting lodge.

He cocks an eyebrow at me. 'Bow arm a bit off this morning, Little Scourge?' He knows I never miss a shot. And he'd never miss an opportunity to bait me about it.

'Still following me like a lost puppy, Wrangler?' I tighten the strap on my quiver so I don't have to look at him, trying to ignore the angry race of my heart.

'Not such a good idea to be out here alone,' he says, tone changing.

'That's one I haven't heard before. Tell me something new, why don't you?'

'I'm serious. All manner of hunters stalk the Kyder – human and animal. But if you must go exploring, at least

don't do it alone.' He inspects his boots, sheepish. 'I thought Brim might—'

'Brim might what?' He has the audacity to look jealous. 'You thought he'd be keeping guard over me as usual?' I shake my head in contempt. 'Here's some news for you, Wrangler: Brim might once have been my Warder, but we're not in Isfalk anymore. I don't need permission for my movements, from him or anyone else. And I'm not about to go jumping into his arms simply because yours are taken.' I shoulder my bow. 'Not that it's any of your business if I do.'

'Straight for the jugular. Just as I'd expect. But your assumptions are as off-mark as your aim this morning, Scourge.' He smirks and I want to slap him right across that mole winking in his cheek. 'What I was going to say is that I thought Brim, as a military man, would have wanted someone at your back, especially in unknown territory.' He takes a breath, voice softening a little. 'I knew you'd head out here at the first opportunity. It was written all over your face as soon as you caught sight of the jungle yesterday – that longing for the wilds ... the need to be hunting again.' He says it like he's talking of himself as much as me.

I turn my back on him, casting my gaze about the clearing like I'm scouting for game. Brim might have eventually guessed where to come looking for me when I didn't join Osha and the others for breakfast, but the wrangler knew before I was even missed. After all his lies and secrecy, it galls that he knows me so well. I don't want him to see my anger, though. Getting angry shows I care: indifference will pain him more. I know him well, too.

‘Look, Nara,’ he says. ‘About yesterday ...’ But he trails off, like he can’t find the words to describe the events that changed everything between us.

‘Yesterday?’ I ask. ‘You mean when your girlfriend stepped aboard the *Na’quat* while I was still naked in your bed? The betrothed you forgot to tell me about?’

He sighs. ‘Nara, let’s talk.’

‘No, *you’re* the one who should have talked ... weeks ago when we were riding through the Wasteland Plains and you kissed me.’

‘*I* kissed *you*? Are you sure about that, Scourge?’

I snatch a breath. After everything he’s done, he dares suggest I was the one who made the first move. ‘Go to hell, Wrangler.’

‘Tempting, but keeping an eye on you is a far worse fate, I think.’

‘I don’t need anyone keeping an eye on me, least of all you! Fecs alive, if I’m to be a prisoner here, too, I might as well have saved myself the journey from Orlathston. Or from Isfalk, for that matter.’

‘You’re not a prisoner here.’ He frowns like he’s offended. ‘You can go where you like.’

‘Really? Is that the truth, Wrangler?’ It takes all the willpower I possess to gentle my voice and quiet my rattled breathing. ‘So, I’m free to do what I want?’

‘Have you ever done otherwise?’ He folds his arms and scans the clearing as if my being here is a case in point.

‘Can I ask a favour, then?’ My change in tone takes him by surprise and his expression slips from suspicion to hope.

Perhaps he can't quite believe I'd give him the chance to earn my forgiveness, and yet he seems to long for it anyway. I draw close, so close that his lips almost brush my own. 'There's something I want, Nixim.' I trace the neck of his gilet with a finger, and his pupils dilate when I say his name. 'Will you do it for me?'

Voice a low rumble, he answers, 'Your will, my hands, remember?'

'I remember.' I bite my lip and his breath hitches. 'So, what I want,' I say, stabbing a finger in his chest, 'is for you to skip on back to your lyfhort and leave me the fec alone!'

His shoulders drop and he lifts his face to the blue sky peeping between the jungle's canopy. 'I guess I deserved that.'

'You deserve a whole lot more than that.'

We freeze at the sound of the undergrowth being trampled nearby. A husky voice calls out, but its owner is no man. The slender woman who emerges from the trees has thick black curls escaping her sand scarves. The thin sleeves of a fitted chemise boast athletic arms. When she shouldered her weapon, I realise the heart-shot that felled the deer was hers. The wrangler isn't even carrying a bow. If I was in any doubt as to who this woman is, the little mole to the side of her mouth settles it for me. She's the wrangler's sister; one of the two women I rode behind in sullen silence for hours on the journey inland yesterday.

She makes a quick exchange in Reis with her brother, before running kohled eyes over me from boots to crown. Her face had been shrouded during our ride across the desert, and now, up close, I notice her skin is a shade darker than

the wrangler's, her stare even shrewder. The colour of her irises is complicated, like his – an inner ring of pale brown, changeable as the evening dunes we'd crossed on the long ride from the coast. When she adjusts her quiver, the underside of her wrist shows a delicate branding peeking from beneath her cuff.

'Hra kim, sha Azza Ni Azzadur,' she says boldly, a note of challenge in her tone. I flounder at the Reis words, determined not to look at the wrangler for help. 'Azza Ni Azzadur,' she repeats.

'Sorry, I ...'

The mole dances at her lip. 'It is my *name*. I am not interrogating you.'

'You know Isfalki,' I reply. 'You barely opened your mouth yesterday, so I assumed—'

'Perhaps I had nothing to say.' She shrugs, but it's clear she's the type of woman who has plenty of opinions, even if they don't reach her tongue. Her Isfalki is accented but good, and I'm wondering where she could have learned it this far south when she asks, 'So, do you have one too?'

'One what?'

'A name.' She draws it out as if I might be simple, glancing at the wrangler.

'Oh ... yeah ... I mean, I'm Nara,' I say, feeling all kinds of stupid.

'Rest easy, Nara Fornwood. I know who you are. My brother has told me all about you.' Under her scrutiny, the wrangler busies himself with his water flask, taking a long drink and squinting off through the trees. But when I stare

a beat too long, he meets my eye, emotions scudding across his face as quickly as clouds across the taiga – regret, guilt, frustration. I don't care to know which. I sip from my own water skin, trying to be as casual as I can with resentment pulsing on my tongue and anger burning up my cheeks.

His sister hums softly at our silent exchange. 'My brother,' she muses. 'Still trying to tame the storm, I see.'

'My sister,' the wrangler retorts, 'still spouting ridiculous proverbs, I see.' And with that, he hacks peevisly through the foliage and is swallowed by the jungle.

Azza's chuckle at his departure has a smoky hoarseness to it that belies her neat frame. 'It is a Reis saying: *The fool who tries to tame the storm eats only sand.*' Her eyes glitter.

'You think *I'm* the storm ... the trouble that needs to be tamed? Bit of an assumption when you've known me, what ... one whole day?'

She lowers her chin with a look that warns not to take her for a fool. 'Nixim has never been very good at staying clear of trouble, and you, Nara Fornwood, are trouble. Anyone with eyes can see it.' She frowns. 'But there is more resting on your arrival in Reis than my brother's heart.'

Her words hit the pit of my stomach – not the put-down, but the threat of the unknown. The weight of what it means to be here kept me awake for most of the night, tossing with worry for Osha. She's my main concern; she always has been. And yet, on the wrangler's advice, I've brought her to a land we know nothing of, looking for answers to an ability she won't even admit to possessing, both of us ignorant of what getting those answers might cost.

‘I couldn’t care less about the heart of your trouble-loving brother,’ I tell Azza. ‘But I do care about my sister, and he’s told me fec-all about what the Reis intend to do with her. So, any light you want to shed on that would be gratefully received.’ Not the most diplomatic request for information, I’ll admit, but at least I asked without putting my arrow to her throat.

We lock eyes for a moment, and I can feel her appraising me. ‘You Isfalki,’ she says, heading off in the direction of the felled deer, ‘you talk too much when you hunt.’

As if the wrangler wasn’t enough, now I have his poxy sister to deal with.

## THE SISTER AND THE BETROTHED

‘**W**e call them *turcas* in Reis,’ Azza says when I follow her to the river. ‘They are plentiful in the Kyder.’ She pulls out her knife and field dresses the small deer with the quick, capable hands of an experienced hunter. Her technique is different from mine, and I watch her, engrossed. When she’s almost finished, she says, ‘As children, my brother and I would spend days tracking them here, camping out and running wild. He loved this forest.’

‘Don’t indulge me with *talk*,’ I say, but she smiles as if seeing straight through me.

‘He did not choose to leave Reis or become a Seeker, you know. It was our father who sent him off to hunt for Pure girls like you and your sister.’ She grunts and I can’t tell whether it’s in disapproval or the effort of her work. ‘My father thought such a quest would give Nixim purpose, encourage him to fully embrace the traditions and beliefs of our people.’



‘Yeah, *that*,’ I scoff, angling my head so she can better see the branding scattered across my stubbled scalp. ‘He wasn’t exactly searching for girls like me.’ The fine blue freckles of the Brume virus, evidence of my susceptibility to disease, identify me as a common Brand, unlike my sister, Osha. Her unblemished skin sets her firmly in the camp of the Mor minority – Pure women in great demand across the Continent as breeders of stronger, healthier offspring.

To my surprise, Azza barely glances at the markings. ‘I hear you are struggling to believe our prophecy?’ she says instead.

The wrangler must have confided in her, and I find myself resenting the idea of them discussing me like I’m some kind of problem to be managed. ‘You have to admit, it’s ridiculously far-fetched. One Pure woman with magical powers to cure the Branded and return peace and happiness to the world?’ I fold my arms. ‘It’s a children’s bedtime story ... and I’m hardly a child.’

She treats me to that husky laugh again. I’d expected anger, an argument. Perhaps I’d even wanted one – a distraction from my bitter disappointment with her brother. But, far from being offended, she’s entertained. And that annoys me even more.

‘Look, I’m sorry if I can’t naively swallow your belief in this Elita, or whatever you call her. But if you’re angling for someone to be the prophet of your little sect, you can think again about my sister.’ I’m being churlish now, maybe even dangerously provocative given our situation as guests in her homeland, at the mercy of customs I don’t understand. But attack is what I know best when I feel threatened.

I think about Osha and her healing gifts, about the new life growing inside her. My grandmother made me promise to look after her, as if she knew Osha would be the one to need it. And now we're out of the Settlement, out of Orlathston, I'm not about to let her be manipulated into another cultish prison – one where she might wear a crown, but a prison all the same. 'I'm sure you can find a home-grown princess who'd enjoy wearing the robes of prophet queen a whole lot more than my sister. Why don't you ask Nixim's girlfriend?' I scoff. 'She seems ready-made for the role.'

An image from yesterday's journey inland from the *Na'quat* visits me sharp as a stitch in my ribs: the wrangler's betrothed, mounted on a stallion of pure white, her sand scarves fringed with silver coins that jangled in the breeze. Her riding manta was made of a gossamer fabric, shot with threads that caught the sun like veins of gold in rock – impressively impractical, but dazzling all the same. Underneath it, her toned legs were clad in supple, well-worn leather, and the curved blade on her hip had a scabbard scuffed from use. Even I wasn't fool enough to believe she was all decorative vanity; her riding skills proved that. And yet her hand when she mounted her horse had reached for Nixim's shoulder, and all through the long trek around the edge of the desert she'd inclined her head to speak only to him.

'You refer to Hira?' Azza interrupts my thoughts. 'I see you have not forgiven her for yesterday's antics.'

'It was a cheap trick with the horse.'

'That is Hira, to the bone. She enjoys childish games.'

‘It didn’t feel childish. That colt could have broken my neck.’

Azza’s soft hum has something knowing in it, as if she understands far more of me than I do of her.

The horse I’d been given for the journey was a magnificent beast, surely meant for royalty, not an orphaned Brand in shabby hunting leathers and worn-out boots. He turned out to be skittish, constantly chomping at the bit and demanding to be given his reins. I could taste his impatience foaming on my tongue, feel the nervy twitch of his flank in my thighs, but I couldn’t seem to sway him calm. By comparison, the mounts of Osha, Brim, Haus and the Maw were like docile nags, bowed by the merciless sun and a heat that could crack skulls.

The entire day I wrestled that animal along the edge of the Storm Sands and across the arid plain inland from the sea, until we ascended a ridge. At the summit, Hira finally halted our party, watching a point ahead of us with anticipation. At first, all I could see was a rock massif in the distance, eddies of sand swirling here and there. But gradually, as the sun dropped, shadows began to form – shadows that turned into the silhouettes of hundreds of tents and gers sheltering in the lee of the plateau. There, in the stone, the shapes of windows and doors, crenelations and ramparts slowly appeared. An entire fortress had been cut into the rock, everything the colour of sand, until the evening light embossed the city onto the landscape.

‘Cha Shaheer,’ the wrangler announced. ‘The Shadow City of Reis.’ As if the name was a starting bell, Hira heeled her mount, teeth flashing white as she trilled a wild burr and

galloped off, tossing Nixim a look of pure challenge over her shoulder. He hesitated at my horse's flank, but I wouldn't look him in the face. I wanted none of the race that was afoot, least of all at his invitation. His horse whinnied impatiently, and the next moment I was watching him chase his betrothed across the sands. A kick to the ribs if ever I'd felt one.

'Poxes if I'm going to be left behind like dead carrion!' Brim called out. Haus, Osha and the Maw followed his lead, galloping into the growing dust trail. My colt reared in complaint, then yanked the reins from my grip and lunged after them. I'd been grappling him to an unsteady trot for so long, his speed felt fluid and easy, his adrenalin metallic on my tongue, pulse a hungry drum. For the first time since hearing that knock on the door of the captain's cabin, I felt strong again, full of purpose ... I felt myself.

But Hira couldn't have predicted how I'd handle the horse. She couldn't have known about my skill with animals.

'The race across the hearthsands at dusk is a tradition,' Azza tells me as she cleans her field knife. 'The Shadow City may be our beating heart, but the Reis come from nomadic roots. As children we are given saddles before boots. I believe Hira intended the stallion to test your ... *mettle*. That is the Isfalki word, no?'

'Stallion? That horse was a colt. Haus said he couldn't have been broken in more than a week – his shoes were still shiny! Hira didn't want to test my mettle. She wanted to see me on my arse.'

'Perhaps,' Azza says. 'Yet she failed, did she not? You mastered the animal. Were you not satisfied with the results

of the race?’ Those big eyes bore straight through me again. It’s almost as if she’s guessed how naturally I fell into the beast’s rhythm, into the bellow of his lungs, the beat of his hooves, how we’d become one and the same creature. We’d set a fearless pace across the plain, flying past the Maw and Brim, and then Haus, who’d likely reined in his horse to keep abreast of Osha. When I flanked Azza, drawing neck-and-neck with the wrangler, I ignored his shouts – encouragement or warning, I didn’t care in that moment. All that mattered was the race and the gates of Cha Shaheer and getting there first, before the woman who’d jangled like a bauble the entire journey from the *Na’quat*; the woman who clearly considered me so far below the level of a threat she’d barely acknowledged my existence.

The stone walls of the city loomed before us, dusted pink in the last light. Under a giant archway built between two rock faces, we thundered to a stop, neck-and-neck. Hira swung in her saddle as our horses danced around each other, gifting me an exhilarated grin clearly meant for Nixim. I was faced with her beauty up close for the first time. Sand scarves dislodged by the ride, her flawless brown skin was offset by long hair that made my throat tighten. Not jet black like the wrangler’s or his sister’s, but a shimmering platinum, the colour of spider silk in a dewy dawn.

‘Hira spoke to you under the gates of Cha Shaheer,’ Azza prompts. She’s busy binding the feet of the turcas, but she can’t quite disguise her curiosity, which makes me suspect there’s far more than my pride and a horse race at stake here. ‘What did she say?’

‘She told me I rode well *for a Sky-Eye*. It’s the nickname the Hrossi give the Isfalki because of our—’

‘And what was your reply?’ Azza interrupts, making it clear she’s worldly enough to know a little slang without my help.

‘I told her I was a Fornwood Solitary, not an Isfalki.’

Azza pauses her work for a moment. ‘That was an unfortunate response.’

‘Why?’

‘Hira is a Pure, as you probably guessed. You might as well have said you were riddled with disease. She will be sure to tell the whole of Reis that you are branded *and* feral.’

‘Then she’d be telling the truth. It’s what I am.’ I tap the branding above my ear with a shrug, but I can’t help remembering the way Hira’s lips had thinned at my grubby leathers, the nicks and scars on my hands from fighting. By the time she got to the shaved strip of my scalp, it wouldn’t have made any difference if I was a branded Solitary or a Mor from Isfalk’s Founding Four: I was no more her competition than the shit from her horse. ‘Welcome to civilisation, Nara Fornwood,’ she’d announced.

‘Apologies,’ I shot back, ‘we haven’t been introduced.’ I matched her tight smile with one of my own. ‘Nixim failed to mention you.’

It was the truth, after all. Not my fault she hadn’t liked hearing it. She’d ignored me, barking orders to an approaching stable hand instead. ‘Hira can call me a feral, if she likes,’ I tell Azza. ‘I can hold my own when it comes to slinging insults.’

‘My brother warned me your tongue is as sharp as your sword.’ She grunts, and it’s not from shouldering the turcas.

‘But I know Hira. If you have slighted her, she will make sure you pay for it.’

‘Look, I’ve got bigger things to worry about than your brother’s girlfriend—’ I begin, but she holds up a finger to shush me. Poxes, what is it with these high-handed Reis women? When I follow her line of vision, I realised she’s spotted another turcas, about sixty paces downriver, a doe this time – the mate of our felled quarry. The deer lowers her head to drink, unaware of our presence. Azza leans quietly against the trunk of a palm tree, easing the burden of the buck. ‘Perhaps you will have better luck with this one, Nara Fornwood?’ she whispers.

Without thinking, I nock an arrow and line up the shot. She wants to challenge me? Okay, then. I turn my thoughts inward, listening for the doe’s heartbeat, calling to it with my own. It’s there, tripping faintly inside me, but it grows halting and faint every time I try to press dominance. I remember the dreams that plagued me last night: not just fears for Osha’s physical safety, but terrors about our skills – nightmares in which my sister’s sway grows ever stronger the more she denies it, while mine slips away like sand between my fingers the harder I grasp.

Azza remains perfectly still, watching me with such intensity, the shot starts to feel less like a challenge than a test. Suddenly I’m nervous, afraid of failing. Afraid of not failing. ‘The mark’s too far,’ I mutter. ‘Stupid bow’s throwing my aim.’ Shame burns my cheeks at the excuse.

‘You do not aim with your bow, Nara Fornwood. We both know it.’

I snatch my gaze from the deer to stare at her. Does she know about my skill? Has the wrangler told her? ‘Quiet yourself,’ she says gently, the previous note of challenge gone. ‘Hone your mind to your purpose.’

The words sound vaguely familiar, her light touch on my wrist reassuring. I draw the string and set my sights, doing as she says ... doing what I do best. With lowered lids, I pinpoint the heat, the smell, the very breath of the creature. The doe’s heartbeat hammers inside me now, clear as the peck of a sapsucker in the Fornwood, and I leap on it, growing her thirst and keeping her distracted at the water’s edge. The arrow sings through the trees, a clean hit. I might be smug if I wasn’t too busy staunching the gush of blood from my nose.

Azza doesn’t comment on the shot. Instead, she unwinds her sand scarf, offering it to stop the flow. ‘Do you always bleed when you hunt?’

‘I’m not sick, if that’s what you’re bothered about. It just happens from time to time.’

‘When you sway?’

I swipe angrily at my nose. ‘So, your brother tells me nothing yet blabs everything to you?’

‘He did not have to ... *blab*. I saw it for myself with the colt yesterday. And again now.’ She studies my branding for a time. The Blood-wife told me the skill to sway only developed in Pure women ... and yet here I am. I can’t tell whether Azza is perplexed or shocked: her face would do well playing cards in any Isfalki tavern.

‘You going to speak or just keep eyeballing me?’



Her frown deepens. A second later her lips twist in understanding. Her Isfalki really is good.

Still, she ignores me, walking off towards the felled doe. ‘You’re just like your brother, you know,’ I call after her. ‘Or is being broody and secretive something they teach at school here in Reis?’ I stomp through the dense foliage, trying to juggle the scarf at my nose, my bow and quiver. ‘So I’m a Brand and I bleed when I hunt. Big deal. It’s hardly going to kill me.’

She tugs my arrow from the deer and hands it back to me. ‘Come, Nara Fornwood. Let us finish our sport. Some breakfast might sweeten your mood.’

‘Fec’s sake, my mood is perfectly fin—’

‘As fine as it was before you and Nixim arrived?’ She cuts me a look, eyebrow raised. There’s no getting anything past this woman. I stride ahead so she can’t see me gathering my thoughts, trying not to return to that night aboard the *Na’quat*. The wrangler and his lyfort have thrown me off my game, but they’re none of my concern now. Protecting Osha must be foremost in my mind. *Azza* can sweeten my mood all she likes, but corner something *feral* defending its own and you’re going to get bitten. She’s a hunter. She should know that.