

Ribboner – Emily, Year 12, QLD

“Between a girl’s life and death, there lies a red ribbon.”

The words were faint under thundering drums, banging down the tunnel in an ominous echo.

“The weak fall beneath it, unworthy to be called women.”

My breath came fast and heavy, choking on dust as the next phrase reached my ears. I forced myself to ignore the clang of chains bouncing along the corridor, waiting for the distant announcer to speak again.

“The worthy wear the ribbon – a symbol of strength.”

The stone passage quaked, gritty fragments sprinkling from the ceiling. I gripped my sword, knuckles white, as I neared the opening. My stomach lurched as the next line ricocheted off the rock,

“Come forth, Ribboner and prove yourself!”

My boot stepped over the threshold, hurtling me into the blinding glare of the canyon ring. My arm raised instinctively as I shut my eyes, the bronze shield blocking some of the red light blazing off the towering walls. The arena trembled as a thousand Watchers stomped against the earth. The bellow of a Bantar horn cracked the air, sending a roar of excitement across the stands.

I jumped as a guttural roar shook the earth. A living Bantar thrashed behind a thick iron portcullis. Its three black horns glistened smooth and sharp in the high noon sun, no less threatening than the plated tail thumping against the toughened steel. Its dark eyes peered between the bars, darting wildly around the stadium, looking almost as scared as I was...

“Ria Kastan, are you worthy?”

The booming voice rang out across the battleground, and a tense hush settled over the crowd, magnifying the rattling metal. Swallowing the bile rising in my throat, I adjusted my hold on the hilt.

I wanted to believe that being a Ribboner was an honour, the reason every girl longed to turn 18. But my heart twisted as I sent a small, shaking shout into the air,

“I, Ria Kastan, am worthy of womanhood!”

The resounding cheer hit me in the chest, and I resisted covering my ears. There could be no sign of weakness here, I reminded myself. But I still flinched as the Bantar howled, its sound

rolling across the rocky plain. I fought the growing panic swirling in my stomach, fists clenching and unclenching in their leather bindings.

A metallic shriek pierced through the clamour of voices shouting above me. Sunlight glinted off the lattice as the heavy gate began to rise.

My eyes found Javi sitting in the risers, her flaxen braid contrasting sharply with the crimson strip of fabric entwined in the strands. I looked away from my sister and stared at the wild, rearing beast. Unwanted memories flashed in my mind:

My mother thrusting a bow into my hands, pointing to a Sand Hawk...

Javi laughing at my tears as she snapped the neck of a muskrat...

“No.” I tried to push the images down.

...My fingers dropping a carving knife, the clatter still echoing in my mind... ...My father shaking his head, “coward” slipping from his lips...

“Stop.” I shook my head, rolling my shoulders as I dug my back foot into the sand. “Focus, Ria.” I went through the instructions Javi gave me.

“Make the Bantar charge at you. Yell at it. Clash your weapons. Brace your sword and prepare to stab it when it passes. And don’t flinch. The tribe doesn’t accept weakness, Ria.”

My stomach tightened, remembering her emphasis on my name. What if I wasn’t vicious enough for them? What if they cast me out into the desert, a waste of a girl? I grit my teeth, determined to break my reputation as a weakling. But a thought whispered in my mind, dampening my resolve.

“You’re not like Javi.”

She was a fighter – brilliant with a sword, deadly with a spear, and faultless behind a bow. Her Bantar battle had lasted only 4 minutes. She was the first in our village to reach Ribboner age, and even at 7 years had killed more desert foxes than I could count. She never cried at the sight of blood or shivered at the thought of slicing flesh.

“You’ve never been like Javi.”

She was so proud the day she fastened that red ribbon in her hair, finally worthy to Partner... to Mother. I could never tell her how I cried that night. How the Bantar’s dying wail still haunts me even two years later...

“You will never be like Javi.”

The horn blared again, ripping my mind back into the present. Fear exploded in my chest as the beast leapt out from its prison, tearing up the ground in a roaring frenzy, throwing up pillars of sand as its tail thwacked against the floor. I froze as its bony head whipped around to stare at me, its three horns covered in dust. I felt a primal sound rush upwards in my throat, but I bit down on my tongue, hot blood filling my mouth.

The Bantar's armoured body turned to face me as it flared its nostrils, swinging its club-like tail in a silent threat. Or a silent plea?

"Don't think about its feelings, Ria!" My brain screamed at me, a static hum pulsing in my ears.

I suddenly remembered my weapons, hoisting the sword in front of me, its balance feeling unnaturally heavy. My hand trembled, and I stiffened my arm to steady the blade.

Someone was shouting at me. It was Javi. I saw her in the corner of my vision, aggressively waving her hands, motioning me forward.

I sucked in a breath and shuffled forwards, thrusting my sword out. But the Bantar lifted its front hoofs with an intimidating grunt. I retreated three steps, relief flooding my veins as it lowered itself, tail swishing back and forth.

Javi would definitely punch me for that.

"Coward." My brain taunted.

Anger flared in my gut as I fought with myself.

"Step forward! Just take a step if you're so brave!"

Javi was standing now, banging an invisible sword against a nonexistent shield. I knew what she wanted. I knew what they all wanted. A fighter.

"I am not Javi. I am not a killer!" My heart cried desperately.

The thought clenched my abdomen, filling me with indecision. No, I was ready. I could do this. They just couldn't see it. No, they had to have a battle to prove it. Resentment rose inside me.

"You want a worthy woman?" I silently dared the crowd, hands clutching the sword in front of me, *"I'll show you someone courageous."*

The sword slipped from my hand and clanged against the ground. There was a collective gasp as a thousand murmuring whispers swirled over my head. I unstrapped the shield from my forearm and flung it out behind me.

The sudden movement made the Bantar rise again, its forefeet crashing against the ground, vibrating the earth. I refused to look at Javi, locking my vision on the animal as I stepped backward. The creature roared, rearing again. The anger ate my fear as I took another step, never breaking eye contact.

The beast ran at me then, full pelt, chunks of rock flicking off its tail as a horrifying bellow shook the stadium. Sand bounced under its thundering hooves. The warm smell of leather mingled with the dust as its gleaming horns filled my vision. I waited until the last possible second before rolling to the left, grit crunching between my teeth. I shot up and turned as the Bantar nearly crashed into the opposite wall before skidding around to look at me. I prepared to dive again; my only plan, to beat the creature through sheer exhaustion rather than kill it with my own hands.

The Bantar stood, head tilted, its heaving snorts spitting dust clouds. The Watchers tensed, the silence thick with anticipation. I raised my hand and took a step back, indicating I was no threat, my heart hammering inside me,

“Kill it, coward!” somebody shouted.

But I thrust my chest, calling, “I am no murderer!”

I blocked out the crowd, those Stygian horns my only focus. But instead of charging, it kneeled, a low rumble escaping its throat. My muscles sagged as I let out a breath, watching as it rolled on its side, still looking at me. I couldn’t move. There was no sound except my shallow, shaking breath. As if noticing my uncertainty, the Bantar moaned again, soft and deep. Ignoring all better judgement, I crouched, hand out, inching towards where it lay. It remained still. The distance between us closed, step by cautious step. I was so close its hot breath fluttered my sleeve. I reached out and placed my fingertips on its rough muzzle. It gave a slight jerk, but it didn’t lift its head.

“I have no wish to hurt you,” I whispered. The Bantar’s eyes were dark and gentle.

“We are no cowards.” I smiled, stroking its muzzle as I lifted the shining red ribbon from its curved horns.