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Allen & Unwin
Camberaygal Country
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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ANH DO

WOLF GIRL¹⁰

THE RACE IS ON



Illustrations by Lachlan Creagh


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1

THE STADIUM

I could not believe my eyes.

The last time I'd seen my big sister, she'd been speeding away on a train to Tunny. Later, I'd heard Kate had visited Paradise Island with Braxan leaders, to do 'some kind of training' while going by the name 'Linda'.

On both occasions, I had assumed her to be a prisoner of the Braxans – but now here she was right in front of me, on a stage overlooking the vast Moon City stadium, proclaiming herself to be the Commander of the Northern Border.

How on earth did it all fit together?

Feeling a bit faint, I double-checked the details.

Kate was wearing a Braxan uniform. There were soldiers with her, and they weren't pointing at her and shouting things like, 'Get her! Get the imposter!' Instead, the crowd in the stands was cheering loudly as my sister, her face stern, announced that the Championship Games were about to begin.

Everything I saw told me that Kate was who she said she was: a Braxan commander.

HOW? thundered the thought in my head.



'This year's Championship Games,' Kate boomed into the microphone, 'will be like no other! This year our contestants will fight against the treacherous terrain of Riverland itself, attempting feats more dangerous than anything seen before!'

The crowd seemed happy to hear that we contestants would be put through such hardship. Perhaps to distract myself from my confusion, I found myself taking them in, too, almost for the first time.

Who *were* these people, come to watch kids from the last native settlements of Braxan-occupied Riverland competing with each other?



They seemed to be a mix of both Braxans and Riverlans – I saw soldiers, merchants, young families, all kinds of folk – but how could that be? Weren't they supposed to be enemies?

'Whether you are taking some well-earned rest from the army,' continued Kate, 'or joining us as new friends to the Braxan Empire, I promise that you'll find what is to come entertaining.'

So, I thought, enemy soldiers and Riverlan traitors?

Was I being too harsh? If my family had been given the choice between capture, or bowing to new masters in exchange for freedom, which path would we have taken?

I checked on Jarrod and the dogs, still sitting under the stage near the service entrance they had crept through to get in.



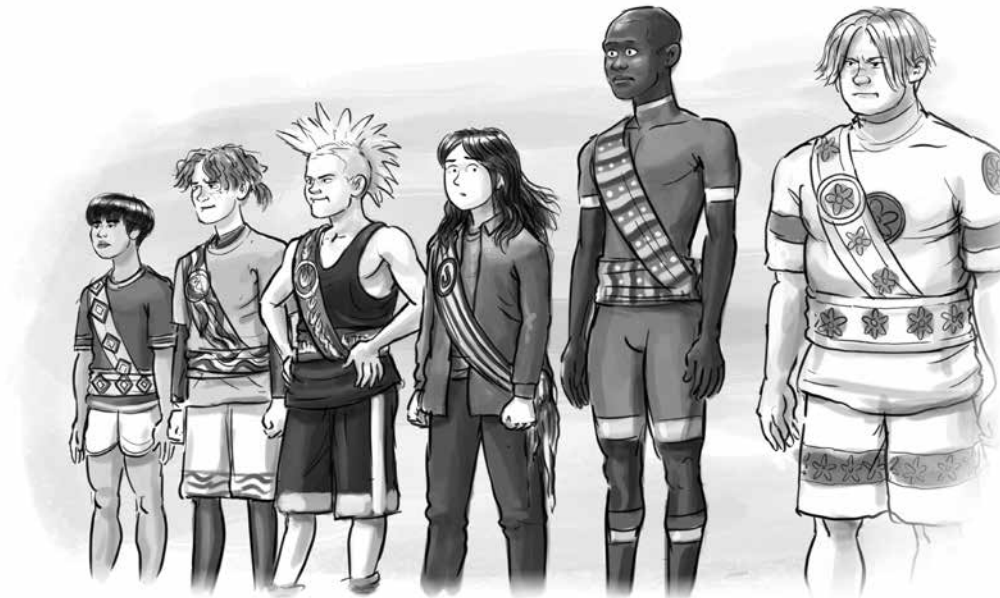
his head turning to and fro at every sound. Pirate and Tiny appeared happy enough, wagging their tails, probably just excited by this whole thing.

I glanced sidelong at my competitors. They were all boys, and were showing their nervousness to varying degrees. Some hid it better than others, but I could smell it on all of them. Each and every one, no matter how far back he set his shoulders or how determined he made his gaze, was afraid.

I met Jarrod's gaze across the distance. *You better look out for them*, I tried to convey.

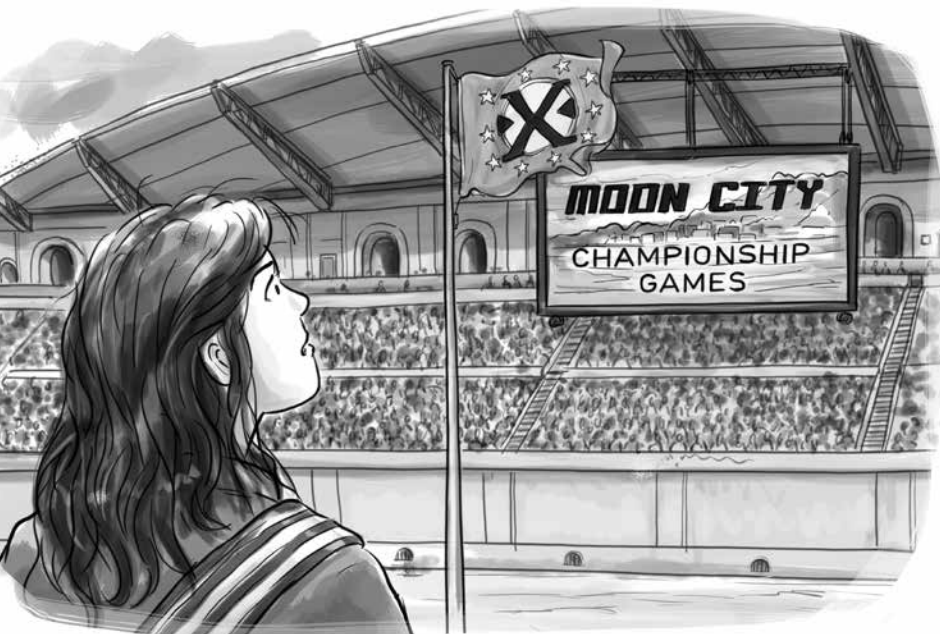
Meanwhile, the dogs were having their own different reactions to what was going on.

Sunrise quietly took in the environment around her, calculating threats. Nosey twitched his snout as the scents of the stadium painted a picture only he could see. Brutus seemed jumpy,



‘Our brave contestants,’ said Kate, ‘will be taken inland by helicopter, deep into the heart of treacherous terrain. With only meagre supplies, they will be abandoned in the wilderness. From there, they will race each other back to us, with their victories and failures broadcast for your enjoyment.’

Kate gave a wave, and I heard a whirring. Glancing around, I saw a giant TV screen lowering at the far side of the stadium.



‘The winner,’ said Kate, ‘will be the one who reaches the flag first, and they shall be granted a wish of their choosing.’

Kate pointed to a flag fluttering high on a pole in the middle of the stadium.

‘Let it not be said,’ said Kate, ‘that the Braxan Empire is unjust. If any of our competitors, having heard what I’ve had to say, wish to quit the Games, now is the moment to do so.’

Her gaze swept along the line of us. I felt it coming my way. Choices flashed through my mind. I could lower my eyes and hope she didn’t recognise me . . . but I found that this was not my instinct. Instead I raised my face and let my anger shine forth.

As Kate's eyes found mine, I locked them in place. For the briefest of moments her face was clearly shocked, and I heard her swallow through the microphone.



I guess she heard herself too, because she quickly smoothed her expression and stood up even straighter.

'Do any of you,' she asked, her voice somewhat shaky, 'wish to give up your place?'

Several seconds passed. No one said anything.

'Very well,' said Kate. 'Then it's time you were on your way.' She pointed at an archway at the far side of the stadium, where some soldiers stood with a cameraman. 'Your helicopter will be landing soon. People of Braxas and Riverland – let our contestants hear you!'

The crowd erupted as the boys and I started to walk towards the arch.

