For my god-daughters, Florence and Elsa

J.B.

For

O.L.G.

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-8693-9; TPB: 978-1-5266-3779-6; eBook: 978-1-4088-8692-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co. Ltd, Shenzhen, Guangdong

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Paper from responsible sources
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BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Books by Jessie Burton

The Restless Girls

Medusa

ATLANTIC
OCEAN

CHAPTER ONE

If I told you that I'd killed a man with a glance, would you wait to hear the rest? The why, the how, what happened next? Or would you run from me, this mottled mirror, this body of unusual flesh? I know you. I know you won't leave, but let me start with this instead: a girl, on the edge, a cliff, her strange hair blowing backwards in the wind. A boy, down below, on his boat. Let them spill themselves out to each other, their story older than time itself. Let them reveal themselves until they reveal too much.

Let me start on my rocky island.

We'd been there four years, my older sisters and me, an eternal banishment we'd chosen for ourselves. And in almost all things, the place suited my needs perfectly, being deserted, beautiful, inhospitable. But forever is a long time and there were days when I thought I might go mad – that in fact, I already had.

Yes, we'd escaped, yes, we'd survived – but ours was a half-life, hiding in caves and shadows. My dog, Argentus, my sisters, me: my name sometimes whispered on the breeze.

Medusa, Medusa, Medusa – in repetition and decisions made, my life, my truths, my quieter days, the thoughts that formed, had fallen all away. And what was left? These jagged outcrops, an arrogant girl justly punished, a tale of snakes. Outrageous reality: I'd never known a change that wasn't monstrous. And here was another truth: I was lonely and I was angry, and rage and loneliness can end up tasting the same.

Four years stuck on an island is a long time to think about everything that's gone wrong in your life. The things people did to you that were out of your control. Four years alone like that sharpens the hunger for friendship and it bloats your dreams of love. So you stand on the top of a cliff, hiding yourself behind a rock. The wind slaps a sail, and the barking of a stranger's dog starts up. Then a boy appears, and you feel that your dreams might soon become reality. Except this time, life won't be outrageous. This time, it will be good and happy.

The first thing I saw of this boy – me on that cliff edge, peering down, him on the boat, unseeing – was his back.

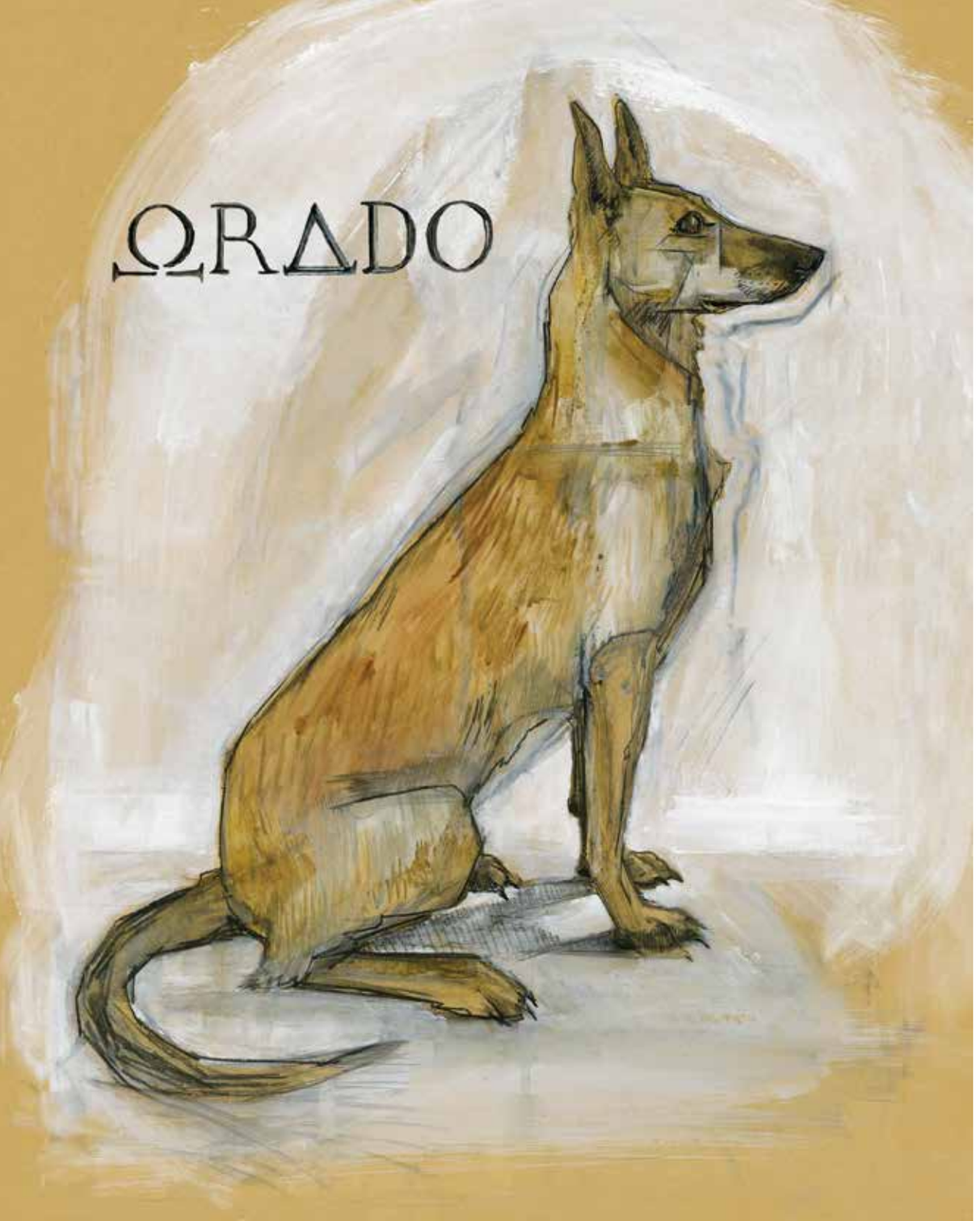
A lovely back. The way he dropped his anchor in my waters. Then, as he straightened up, the outline of his head. A perfect head! Turning round, his face tipped up towards my island. He looked, but he did not see.

I know a lot about beauty. Too much, in fact. But I'd never seen anything like him.

He was around my age, tall and in proportion although a little underweight, as if he'd been travelling far in that boat of his and hadn't known how to fish. The sunlight loved his head, making diamonds in the water to crown it. His chest was a drum on which the world beat a rhythm, and his mouth the music to dance above it.

To look at that boy was painful, yet I could not turn away. I wanted to eat him up like honey cake. It might have been desire, it might have been dread: I think it might have been both. I wanted him to see me, and was frightened that he might. My heart astonished me like a new bruise that wanted pressing.

He seemed to be gauging the scale and insurmountability of my rocks. A dog, source of the bark that brought me to my



lookout in the first place, dashed on the boat deck like a ball of light.

'Orado!' the boy called to this ball of light. 'For the love of Zeus, calm down!'

He sounded stressed, but his voice was clear. He had a strange accent, so I assumed he'd come from far away. Orado the dog sat down on his rump, and wagged his tail. My bruised heart lifted as I watched this creature. A friend for Argentus? I asked myself, thinking how lonely my dog had been for his own species.

But you know what I was really thinking: A friend for me.