



THE  
BRIDGE  
KINGDOM

DANIELLE L.

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A FATE INKED IN BLOOD*

JENSEN

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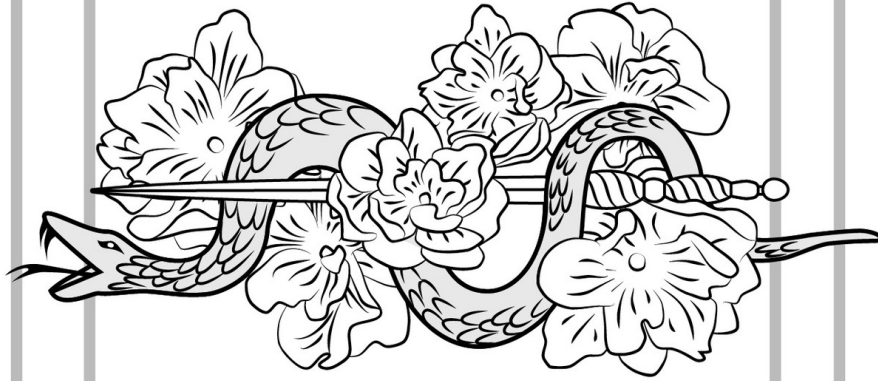
*The Endless War*

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SAGA OF THE UNFATED

*A Fate Inked in Blood*

THE  
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DANIELLE L.  
JENSEN



NEW YORK

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For Spencer



# 1

## LARA

LARA RESTED HER ELBOWS ON the low sandstone wall, her eyes fixed on the glowing sun descending over the distant mountain peaks, nothing between here and there but scorching sand dunes, scorpions, and the occasional lizard. Impassable for anyone without a good camel, the correct provisions, and a healthy dose of luck.

Not that she hadn't been tempted to try more than once.

A gong was struck, the reverberations echoing over the compound. It had called her to dinner every night for the last fifteen years, but tonight it rattled through her like a war drum. Lara took a deep breath to steady her nerves, then turned, striding across the training yard in the direction of the towering palms, her rose-colored skirts whispering against her legs. All eleven of her half sisters were converging on the same place, each dressed in a different gown, the color carefully selected by their Mistress of Aesthetics to complement their features.

Lara detested pink, but no one had asked for her opinion.

After fifteen years caged within the compound, tonight would be the sisters' last here together, and their Master of Meditation had ordered them to spend the hour before dinner in a favored location, contemplating all they had learned and all they would accomplish with the tools they'd been given.

Or at least, what *one* of them would accomplish.

The scent of the oasis drifted over Lara on the faintest of breezes. The smell of fruits and leafy things, the char of cooking meat, and, above all, water. Precious, precious water. The compound was located on one of the few springs in the midst of the Red Desert, but far off caravan routes. Isolated. Secret.

Just the way their father, the king of Maridrina, liked it. And from what she'd been told about him, he was a man who always got what he wanted, one way or another.

Pausing at the edge of the training yard, Lara brushed the bottoms of her feet against her calves, dusting off the sand before sliding on delicate, high-heeled sandals, her balance as steady as though she wore combat boots.

*Click, click, click.* Her heels echoed the frantic beat of her heart as she walked down the pathway of mosaic tile and crossed the small bridge, the gentle sound of stringed instruments rising above the gurgle of water. The musicians had arrived with her father's entourage to provide the entertainment for tonight's festivities.

She doubted they'd be making the return journey.

A bead of sweat trickled down her back, the strap holding a knife against her inner thigh already damp. *You will not die tonight,* she silently chanted. *Not tonight.*

Lara and her sisters converged on the center of the oasis, a courtyard encircled by the spring, which turned it into an island of greenery. They walked toward the enormous table draped with silk and heavy with the silverware required for the dozen or more courses waiting in the wings. Servants, all of them mute, stood behind the thirteen chairs, eyes fixed on their feet. As the women approached, they drew the chairs back, and Lara sat without looking, knowing the rose-colored cushion would be beneath her.

None of the sisters spoke.

Underneath the table, Lara felt a hand grip hers. She allowed her eyes to flick to her left, briefly meeting Sarhina's gaze, before

returning to her plate. All twelve of them were the king's daughters, now twenty years of age, each born by a different one of his wives. Lara and her half sisters had been brought to this secret place to undergo training that no Maridrinian girl had ever before received. Training that was now complete.

Lara's stomach twisted sour, and she dropped Sarhina's hand, the feel of her closest sister's skin, cool and dry relative to her own, making her want to be sick.

The gong sounded again, and the musicians went silent as the girls rose to their feet. A heartbeat later, their father appeared, his silver hair gleaming in the lamplight as he traversed the path toward them, his azure eyes identical to those of every girl present. Sweat ran in rivulets down Lara's legs even as her training had her take in every detail. The indigo of his coat. The worn leather of his boots. The sword belted at his waist. And, as he turned to walk around the table, the faintest outline of the blade hidden along his spine.

When he sat, Lara and her sisters followed suit, none of them making a sound.

"Daughters." Leaning back in his chair, Silas Veliant, the king of Maridrina, smiled, waited for his taster to nod, then took a long mouthful of wine. All of them mirrored the motion, but Lara barely tasted the crimson liquid as it crossed her tongue.

"You are my most prized of possessions," he said, waving his glass to encompass them all. "Of the twenty of my progeny who were brought here, you are all that survive. That you do, that you *thrive*, is an achievement, for the training you've received would've been a test for the best of men. And you are not men."

It was only that very training that kept Lara from narrowing her eyes. From showing any emotion at all.

"All of you were brought here so that I might determine which of you is best. Which of you will be my knife in the dark. Which of you will become queen of Ithicana." His eyes had all the compassion of one of the scorpions in the desert. "Which of you will fracture

Ithicana's defenses, and, in doing so, allow Maridrina to return to its former glory."

Lara nodded once, all of her sisters doing the same. There was no anticipation. At least, not for their father's choice. It had been made days ago, and Marylyn sat at the opposite end of the table, her golden hair braided like a crown at her brow, her dress lamé to match. Marylyn had been the obvious choice: brilliant, gracious, beautiful as the sunrise—and as alluring as the sunset.

No, the anticipation was for what would come next. The choice had been made as to who would be offered to the crown prince—king, now—of the kingdom of Ithicana. What remained unknown was what would become of the rest of them. They were of royal blood, and that made them worth something.

All the sisters, Marylyn included, had gathered close on a pile of pillows the last two nights, each of them speculating as to their fates. To whom of the king's viziers might they be wed. To which other realms might they be offered as brides. Neither the man nor the kingdom mattered. What every girl cared about was that it would be freedom from this place.

But all those long nights, Lara had rested on the outskirts, offering nothing, using the time to watch her sisters. To love them. To remember how she had fought each of them as often as she had hugged them tight. Their smiles. Their eyes. The way, even past childhood, they nestled together like a pile of puppies newly away from their mother.

Because Lara knew what the others did not: that their father intended for only *one* sister to leave the compound. And that would be the future queen of Ithicana.

A salad garnished with cheese and vibrant fruit was placed before her, and Lara ate mechanically. *You will live, you will live, you will live*, she chanted to herself.

"For as long as memory, Ithicana has placed a stranglehold on trade, making kingdoms and breaking them like it were some dark

god." Her father addressed them, his eyes flaring bright. "My father, and his father, and his father before him all sought to break the Bridge Kingdom. With assassins, with war, with blockades, with every tool at their disposal. But not one of them thought to use a woman."

He smiled slyly. "Maridrinian women are soft. They are weak. They are good for nothing more than keeping house and raising children. Except for you twelve."

Lara didn't blink. None of her sisters did, and she wondered for a breath whether he realized that every one of them was considering stabbing him in the heart over the insult of his words. He should know well that every one of them was capable of doing it.

Her father continued, "Fifteen years ago, the king of Ithicana demanded a bride for his son and heir as tribute. As *payment*." His lip curled up in a sneer. "The bastard is a year dead, but his son has called in his due. And Maridrina is ready." His eyes went to Marylyn, then to the servants moving to clear the salad plates.

In the shadows of the growing night, Lara sensed movement. Felt the presence of the mass of soldiers her father had brought with him. The servants reappeared with steaming bowls of soup, the scent of cinnamon and leeks drifting ahead of them.

"Ithicana's greed, its hubris, its contempt for *you*, will be its downfall."

Lara allowed her eyes to leave her father's face, taking in each one of her sisters. With all their training, all their knowledge of his plans, he never intended for any of them, save his chosen one, to live an hour past this dinner.

The soups were placed before them, and every one of her sisters waited for their father's taster to take the first mouthful and nod. Then they picked up their spoons and dutifully began to eat.

Lara did the same.

Their father believed that brilliance and beauty were the most important attributes in the daughter he'd select. That she be the girl

who'd shown the most acumen for combat and strategy. The girl who'd shown the most talent in the arts of the bedroom. He'd thought he'd known which traits mattered most—but he'd forgotten one.

Sarhina stiffened next to her.

*I'm sorry,* Lara silently whispered to her sisters.

Then Sarhina's body began to spasm.

*I pray that you'll all find the freedom you deserve.*

The soup spoon in Sarhina's hand went flying across the table, but none of the other girls noticed. None of them cared. Because all of them were choking, foam rising to their lips as they twitched and gasped, one by one falling forward or backward or to the side. Then all of them were resting motionless.

Lara set her spoon next to her empty bowl, looking once to Marylyn, who was face down in her dish. Rising, she rounded the table, lifting her sister's head from the bowl and carefully cleaning away the soup before resting Marylyn's cheek against the table. When Lara looked up again, her father was pale and on his feet, sword half drawn. The soldiers who'd been lurking in the wings rushed forward, corralling the panicked servants into place. But everyone, *everyone*, was staring at her.

"You were mistaken in your choice, Father." Lara stood tall as she addressed her king. She stared him down, allowing the dark, grasping, and selfish part of her soul to climb to the surface and stare out at him. "*I will be the next queen of Ithicana. And I will bring the Bridge Kingdom to its knees.*"