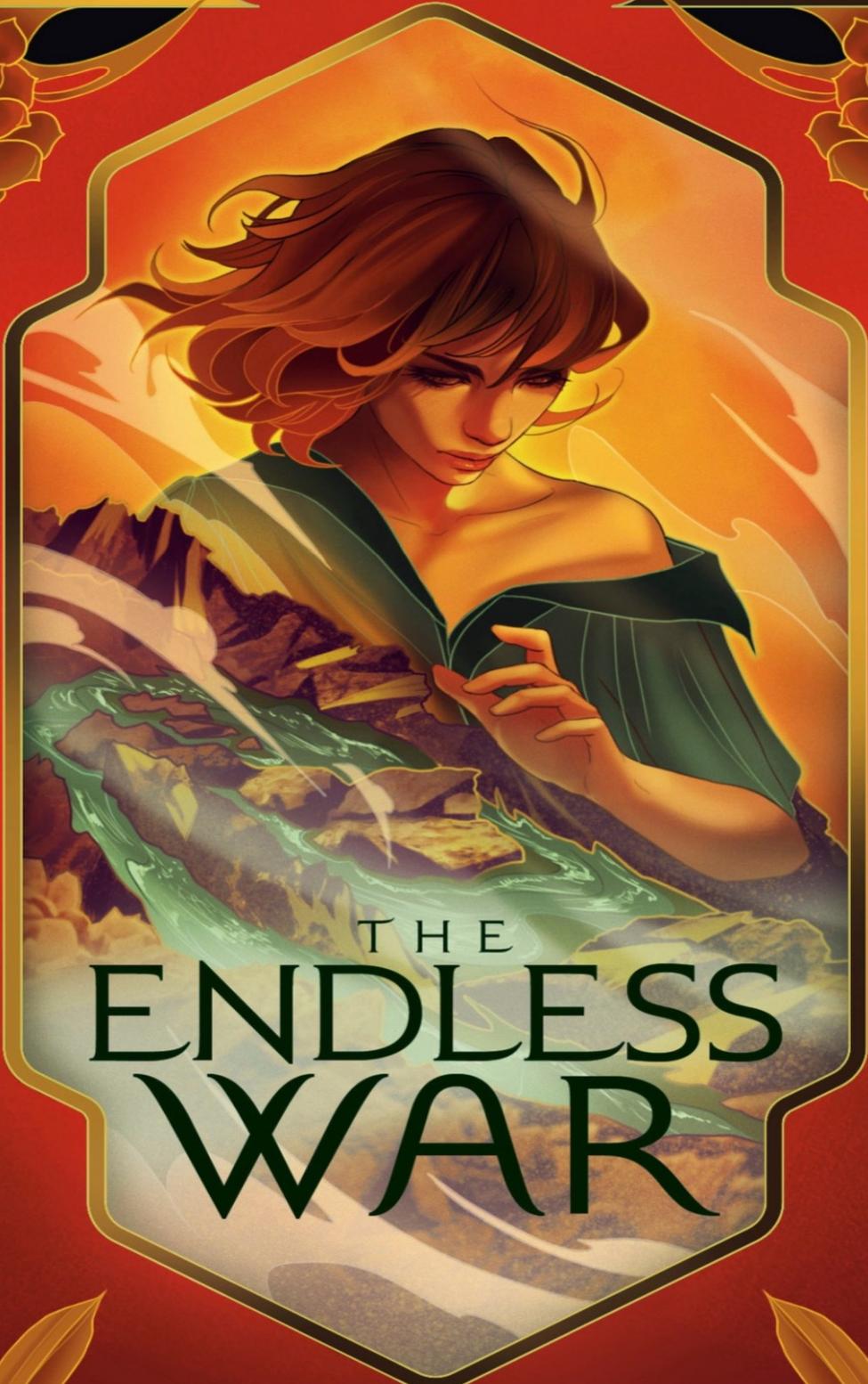


THE BRIDGE KINGDOM BOOK 4



THE
ENDLESS
WAR

DANIELLE L.

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

JENSEN

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SAGA OF THE UNFATED

A Fate Inked in Blood

THE
ENDLESS
WAR



DANIELLE L.
JENSEN



NEW YORK

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For everyone fighting to change their stars...

1

ZARRAH

THE DECK ROSE AND FELL, the roar of the ship slamming against waves deafening. Rough water, which Zarrah knew from experience meant violent storms in the Tempest Seas, the elements standing guard over Ithicana while the kingdom recovered its strength. Not that it had much to fear, given that the eyes of Maridrina and Valcotta were firmly fixed on each other.

And Zarrah was the fuel that had turned the embers of the Endless War into an inferno.

In the hours and days since her aunt, Empress Petra Anaphora of Valcotta, had condemned her to imprisonment on Devil's Island, Zarrah had swiftly come to understand why she hadn't been granted a traitor's death.

The empress *wanted* war with Maridrina.

More than that, she wanted to destroy the man she believed had ruined her plans to burn Vencia. The king who'd become her obsession.

Keris.

Zarrah bit down on her gag, her chest hollowing as his face filled her mind's eye. Always the same moment: them standing on the highest reaches of Southwatch Island. The moment she'd realized that Keris had taken the information she'd given him about the plan to save Ithicana and used it to save *her*.

People were always going to die, Zarrah, the phantom of Keris's voice said to her in the darkness of her cell. There was always going to be a

battle. I just changed the grounds it was fought on.

Eranahl.

Keris had changed the battleground from the bridge to the city Ithicana had been so desperate to defend, knowing it would lure out every soldier in its arsenal. Had ensured it would be a swift and decisive battle so that there'd be no chance Zarrah could reach the city in time to join the fight.

Load your ships and sail home, Zarrah, because no one can accuse you of wrongdoing. The empress's spies will have seen that Vencia remained too strongly defended for you to attack. As for you coming to Southwatch, given my father is about to gain uncontested control of the bridge, the empress is going to look the fool for not doing more to stop him. At least you tried.

She *had* tried. But she'd also been the fool who'd given their strategy to the enemy.

Regain her favor and secure your position as heir. Become empress. Do all the good you dreamed of doing. I'll do the same...We could change our world, Zarrah. Create a peace between two nations who've been at war for generations. Save thousands of our people's lives. But that doesn't come without sacrifice, and that sacrifice is Ithicana.

In the end, Ithicana had been victorious. But in that moment, she'd believed Keris had sent Aren and his kingdom to their doom, and her accusations repeated in her mind. *You say you did it for our kingdoms, but that isn't it, is it? God help her, but she'd remember the pain until she was dust in the grave. You did it for me. To save me. Admit it!*

Zarrah—

Admit it!

I couldn't...I couldn't let you die.

Keris hadn't liked her plan, her strategy, her *choice*, so he'd taken it away. That Ithicana had prevailed and defeated Maridrina didn't matter because that had been luck. That had been the arrival of a storm—and Ithicana's queen—not Keris's design. *I never want to see your face again. Never want to hear your voice. And if we cross paths, I will kill you.*

Zarrah shivered as the last words she'd spoken to him faded. There was no chance of Keris falling to her weapon, because thanks to the Magpie

delivering the truth of her relationship with Keris to the empress, she'd never be free again. The ship she was aboard sailed to Devil's Island, and no one in the history of the infamous prison's existence had ever escaped.

Devil's Island.

Every time Zarrah thought of the ship's destination, nausea roiled in her guts. It was the prison for the worst criminals in the Empire. The vilest and most dangerous. Men and women for whom death was too kind a sentence.

Not for people like her.

True to her aunt's word, Zarrah had received no trial. Yet neither had there been public condemnation, no parade of shame through the streets.

Nothing.

It was as though her aunt wished to keep what Zarrah had done a secret from everyone in Valcotta.

Or perhaps to erase her existence entirely.

Footsteps sounded on the deck, pulling Zarrah from her thoughts. A hooded figure appeared before her cell, carrying a lantern, though it wasn't bright enough to reveal the individual's face beneath the shadows of the hood.

Not that it mattered. Zarrah would recognize her aunt's stride anywhere.

She reached through the bars and pulled out Zarrah's gag. "Hello, dear one."

It was a struggle not to flinch at the endearment, especially given that Zarrah's ribs still bore the bruises from her aunt's rage. "Empress."

Her aunt sighed and drew back her hood, revealing her halo of curls, the silver strands gleaming in the light. If recent events had taken a toll, it didn't show, for her brown skin held its usual luster, the only sign of her age a crinkling around her coal-rimmed eyes. Gold jewels glittered on her ears and her throat, and the faint scent of her floral perfume drifted into Zarrah's cell. Placing the lantern down on the deck, the empress then sat with her back against the wall opposite Zarrah's cell with her knees up, the laces of her military boots swaying.

Silence stretched, and Zarrah's heart beat faster with every passing second. Why was her aunt on the ship? What did she intend that demanded

her presence during Zarrah's incarceration? What did she plan to say? Why was she here? What did she want?

What her aunt said next was not at all what Zarrah anticipated.

"I hate this," the empress said softly. "Hate him for having come between us. For having damaged our love so badly that I fear it is beyond repair."

Zarrah stared, struggling to comprehend what madness motivated her aunt's words even as some cowardly part of her wanted to latch onto them. Wanted to beg her aunt for mercy.

But she was no coward.

"It *is* beyond repair, Imperial Majesty. But not because of Keris's actions."

Her aunt sucked in a breath as though Zarrah had slapped her. "Hearing his name from your lips is a knife to the heart, dear one, because I can hear the affection you still hold for him."

Zarrah knew her feelings for Keris were still there. Hated that they were still there. Yet she said, "You are mistaken."

Her aunt regarded her for a long moment, then looked away, face crumbling with grief. "God spare us, but the rat's claws have sunk deep into your heart, and it is my fault." A tear trickled down her aunt's cheek, and she wiped it away angrily. "I prepared you for life in so many ways, but I neglected to teach you of the devilry of men."

Zarrah snorted in disgust. "I'm a woman grown, not some fifteen-year-old maid who has never been kissed. He was hardly my first lover."

"The fumbling of soldiers. Whereas a man like him uses seduction with the adeptness of a courtesan. You never had a chance, and that is my fault, dear one." Her voice dripped with pity. "I should have made arrangements so that you'd have had the experience to resist his charms."

Zarrah's cheeks burned, and she cursed herself for allowing her aunt to get to her. "He had no idea who I was when we met and didn't learn my identity until...after."

"After you had *sex* with him?" The empress sighed. "You claim a woman's experience with men but speak of intimacy like a girl."

Zarrah clenched her fists, aware that she was rising to the bait but unable to stop herself. “I can—”

Her aunt held up a hand, silencing her. “The rat knew you were Valcottan. That you were a soldier. Your speech would have told him you were from a certain class, and therefore a certain rank. All of which made you a challenge worthy of his attention. A prize to be claimed, and a prize to be *used* once he learned just how valuable you truly were.”

“You pretend knowledge of something you know nothing about.” Why was her aunt pursuing this angle? What was her goal? What was the point of delving into Keris’s intentions when Zarrah had already forsaken him?

“If you were just a lover and not a prize worth keeping, why did he take you to Vencia? Why not arrange for you to escape?”

“He tried,” Zarrah retorted even as she debated whether it was better to fight or remain silent, or if it mattered at all. “You ordered that I be abandoned; Yrina told him so when she was captured.”

Silence.

“Have you stopped to consider that the rat is the source of everything you hold against me?” her aunt asked. “He manipulated you, Zarrah. Put his deft fingers between your legs and played you until you forgot who truly loved you. Forgot what really mattered to you.”

“That is *not* true.” Zarrah wasn’t certain whether she was defending Keris or herself, only that her aunt’s words twisted the past year of her life into something dark and ugly. “You speak of things that you don’t know.”

“I know that all the things he did to make you sing made him king of Maridrina and you a traitor to your people,” her aunt answered. “I know that he sits in luxury in Vencia while you sail toward Devil’s Island. While you defend him, he entertains himself with orgies, showing particular favoritism for a woman named...” She drew a scrap of paper from her pocket and glanced at it. “Lestara. A Cardiffian princess, she was the youngest of Silas’s wives. Very beautiful, I’m told, and well trained in the arts of the bedroom. He’s made her the head of his house, and there is speculation he might make her queen, though I think that is wishful thinking. Maridrina never allows women that much power.” Tucking the

paper away, she added, “You will starve and suffer while he fucks and feasts.”

Zarrah clenched her teeth, Lestara’s face rearing in her mind. It was no secret to her that the harem wife had long had her sights set on Keris. It would seem she’d finally gotten her way, for her aunt’s spies wouldn’t give her unconfirmed gossip. Her stomach hollowed, pain tightening around her chest like a vise, and her aunt shook her head. “I know this grieves you, dear one, for he no doubt made promises of forever. But they weren’t promises; they were lies. Surely you see that now?”

Sickness swam in Zarrah’s stomach, for though she had no right to expect Keris to maintain any level of fidelity after she’d threatened to kill him, her heart seemed to have believed he would. Her heart was a fool.

“You are Keris Veliant’s victim.” Her aunt’s hands balled into fists, and she moved onto her knees, eyes locked on Zarrah’s, the intensity in them matching the fierceness of her voice as she said, “I intend to make him pay for what he has done to you. What he’s done to us.”

Zarrah’s eyes stung, anger and guilt and shame threatening to choke her, but she managed to get out, “If I’m his victim, then why are you sending me to this place? If it’s Keris you’re so angry with, why am I the one you are punishing?”

“Because it’s the only way you’ll learn.” Her aunt reached through the bars to wipe the tears from Zarrah’s face, then cupped her cheek. “If there are no consequences, what is to stop you from making the same mistake again? What is to stop you from being lured back into his bed with sweet words and promises of pleasure?”

Nothing. And everything.

“You’re sending me to a prison for murderers and rapists to learn a lesson about the ways of men?” Zarrah spat in her aunt’s face. “Fuck you.”

Quick as a viper, the empress caught hold of Zarrah’s shirt and jerked her against the bars. Her breath seared Zarrah’s cheek as she shouted, “You’re going to the island because you betrayed Valcotta. Because you allowed yourself to be duped by a Veliant. Because you allowed the blood

of the one who slaughtered your mother—my beloved little sister—to fill you with his seed.”

Zarrah cringed, trying to pull away, but she couldn’t get leverage with her wrists bound together. Wood creaked as though someone approached. She willed them to hurry, but the passageway remained empty.

“But despite all that you have done, I still love you.” Her aunt’s voice quivered with emotion. “You have been my everything, the daughter I never had, Zarrah, so while others counsel me to put you down, instead I am giving you a chance to earn back your place at my side. To prove yourself worthy of once again being Valcotta’s heir. Every hardship you endure, know that it is because of *him* that you suffer. And every moment you survive, know that it is because of *my love* that you live.”

The anchor chain rattled, lowering into the depths, and Zarrah’s pulse throbbed with renewed fear. “You’re mad if you believe I intend to fight for your forgiveness.”

“They say love is a form of madness,” her aunt murmured. “And despite all the pain in my heart, there is no one I love more than you, dear one. Nothing I look forward to more than being reunited with you again.”

There was no denying the faint tug in Zarrah’s heart, a longing for a time when her aunt had been a bastion against every hurt, the warrior who had delivered her from the enemy and promised vengeance against those who’d torn their world apart. For all her aunt twisted words to serve her ends, it was the truths within them that held the most power.

Heavy footfalls echoed down the passageway, and then Bermin appeared. Her cousin inclined his head to his mother. “It’s time, Imperial Majesty.”

Her aunt rose to her feet. “We part today, Zarrah. I hope you will take this opportunity to contemplate the decisions you have made, but more importantly, the decisions you *will* make when you earn your freedom from this place.” Not allowing Zarrah a chance to respond, the empress turned on her heel and walked away, saying to her son, “The arrangements have been made?”

Bermin nodded, pressing his muscled bulk against the wall as though a cobra slithered past rather than a woman.

“Good.” The empress glanced back at Zarrah. “Ensure she arrives at the prison alive. This isn’t an execution—it’s a test.”

Her cousin waited until his mother’s steps reached the main deck, then pulled a key from his pocket and approached the brig. “What did you do, little Zarrah? I’ve never seen her in such a rage. Not even Welran could calm her.”

It was so rare for her cousin to mention his mother’s bodyguard that Zarrah blinked twice before refocusing. “What did she tell you? What reasons has she given for imprisoning me here?”

“Nothing.” He unlocked the bars. “And no reason, beyond that you required punishment.” Her cousin’s large hands closed over the bars, the whole structure groaning as he leaned against it. “There was a whispered rumor among her guards that she’d accused you of betraying Valcotta to the Maridrinians, but that has since been silenced. In truth, as empress, she need not have a reason for sending you here. Her whim is enough.”

This was Zarrah’s last chance to share the truth. The last chance Valcotta might ever have to learn that the only reason the war would not end was that their empress didn’t want it to. “I was trying to end the war, Bermin. There are like-minded Maridrinians who wish for the same. I warned them she intended to raze Vencia, and they were able to thwart the attack.”

He cocked his head. “Just as they thwarted the planned attack in Nerastis.”

It was the attack Bermin had been intended to lead, and she knew how desperately her cousin had wanted the glory of retaking the contested city back under Valcottan rule. Denying that she’d stolen his opportunity would be an obvious lie, and even if he didn’t forgive her, she needed Bermin to believe she was telling the truth. “Yes. Innocents would have died by the thousands, and for what?”

“Honor and vengeance,” he answered without hesitation.

“No.” Zarrah shook her head wildly, knowing she was running out of time. “Hubris and greed. We keep fighting, not for the good of Valcotta, but

to appease the empress's ego. The war doesn't need to continue, Bermin. We could end it."

His brown eyes bored into her own. "These like-minded Maridrinians... Is one of them Keris Veliant?"

Truth or lie? Truth or lie? "Yes. He'd agree to peace, if we gave him the chance. But the empress will never lay down arms. She's obsessed with destroying Maridrina, and she doesn't care what it will cost in blood and lives. There's something wrong with her, Bermin. Something missing from her heart and mind that makes her—"

"Monstrous?" Bermin gave a cold chuckle. "That might be a revelation to you, little Zarrah, but I've faced that monster all my life. Suffered her cutting words and derision. Never good enough, no matter what I did. All made worse the day she made you hers, the girl she'd sculpt into the perfect heir, never mind her own flesh-and-blood son. She cast me aside like trash, yet you were blind to her nature until she turned her venom on *you*."

He wasn't wrong. Over and over, Zarrah had seen how her aunt treated him and had said nothing. Done nothing. But the worst part, in hindsight, was that she'd believed her cousin had deserved the contempt his mother bore for him. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are." Abandoning his grip on the bars, Bermin reached through and shoved her gag back into her mouth. "Perhaps if you'd cared about me, I might be helping you now."

Swinging open the bars, he caught hold of her bound wrists and dragged her down the passageway and then up the ladder into the open air.

It was night, the cold wind carrying the scent of pine and ice.

Zarrah squinted against the brightness of the many lanterns illuminating the vessel. The deck was empty, the crew all below while she was delivered to the prison's guards, who waited by the ship's rail.

Except it wasn't the guards that drew her gaze.

Beyond, a cliff reared, its sheer face split by a gap perhaps half the width of the vessel on which she stood. A curved stone pier joined both sides of the cliff opening, fortified guard towers built where it met the rock.

At the outermost point of the curved pier, a singular dock illuminated by torches jutted out into the sea like a burning tongue.

Devil's Island.

The prison was infamous, the tales about the island itself as numerous as those whispered about the prisoners condemned to it. For all her elevated rank, Zarrah had never had anything to do with the prison, for any criminal whose capture she'd orchestrated was sent to Pyrinat for conviction. But that didn't mean she hadn't heard rumors about the waterway carved through solid rock that spiraled inward to encircle the prison itself, endlessly sucking the sea into its core but never allowing it to flow out again.

As though the water circled around and then down into hell itself.

"This is the condemned?" one of the guards asked as Bermin dragged her closer.

"Yes," he answered. "It is the will of the empress that she be given to the island as punishment for her crimes."

"Then in the empress's name, we will take her."

The woman reached for Zarrah's arm, but Bermin didn't relinquish his grip. "I will deliver her myself."

"None who step foot on the island may ever leave," the woman said. "Not even those who guard its shores. If you step onto that dock, the island will claim you, one way or another."

The guard's words chilled Zarrah's blood, because if that was true, then not even the empress would be able to extract her from the prison.

Bermin, however, was unmoved. "Do you know who I am?"

The woman's head tilted. "Yes, Highness."

"Then you know I am above the law."

Not the slightest bit true, and Zarrah could tell from how the guard's eyes narrowed that she knew it, but the woman only said, "It is not the empress's law, Highness. It is the law of the island."

What does that even mean? Zarrah wondered.

Bermin spat on the deck. "Spare me your mutterings. I will deliver the prisoner myself. All who stand in my way will suffer for it."

The guard lifted one shoulder. “So be it.”

They forced Zarrah into the waiting longboat, Bermin’s grip on her wrists tight enough to leave bruises as the crew released the moorings holding the small vessel in place. No one picked up the oars, but the boat moved swiftly toward the devil’s tongue, caught in the current sucked into its maw. Only as they drew close did they run out the oars, steering the boat down the left side of the curved pier to where guards waited next to a ladder with ropes.

Bermin lifted her out of the boat as though she were a child. The waiting guards forced Zarrah to her knees while the rest disembarked, and she took the chance to assess her surroundings. More men and women watched from the fortified guard-posts at the points where the half-moon pier met the island, bows held loosely in their hands, all watchful. Above the guard-posts, steps were carved into the rock, leading a switchback route to the top. The only route onto the island other than into the mouth.

“On your feet!” Bermin dragged her upward, the tips of her boots scuffing on the stone pier as they moved to the center of the half moon and then down the tongue to where a tiny boat was moored.

“You have two choices,” the female guard said. “Follow the lanterns to the devil’s heart and linger as long as he’ll have you, or row to his teeth and allow him to feast. Either way, he will have your soul.”

Zarrah didn’t bother answering, only stared at the ominous gap in the cliff face. Driftwood flowed into it with alarming speed, the force of the current dispelling any thoughts she might have about rowing against it. Once she was inside the prison, the only way out would be to pledge loyalty to her aunt. If there was a way out at all...

Which meant the time to fight was now.

Zarrah slammed her heel down on Bermin’s instep and was rewarded with a snarl of pain and a loosening of his grip. Jerking free, she shouldered past the female guard and sprinted up the pier, praying that whatever *arrangements* Bermin had made would keep them from shooting her.

She barely made it a dozen steps before a weight slammed into her back, crushing her against the pier. Zarrah kicked out her heels. Once. Twice.

Curses filled the night air, but then hands gripped her legs. Her arms. Her throat.

She tried to suck in a breath, but the hands tightened. Panic flooded her veins and Zarrah clawed at the hands, but others restrained her. She needed to breathe—*God, please help me*—she needed air.

The empress had been lying. Or Bermin hated Zarrah enough that he didn't care about the consequences of defying his mother's orders. The world faded away, but just before blackness consumed her, Bermin said, "You don't deserve my mercy, traitor."

Zarrah only managed to drag in one breath before her cousin lifted her, carrying her to the end of the pier. Then she was flying. Falling.

Her back struck the bottom of the boat, driving the air from her lungs as pain lanced down her spine.

"No!" she tried to scream, but it came out as a wheeze around her gag. "Please!" Zarrah rolled onto her belly, reaching up her bound wrists to the guards, who stared down at her with merciless eyes. Everyone who came to this island was a demon who deserved punishment, and nameless as she was, there was no reason for them to believe her different.

If she went into this place, either it would consume her soul or the empress would.

Bermin unfastened the mooring line, allowing the current to draw the boat away from the pier until he held only the very end of the rope. Screaming around her gag, Zarrah reached for one of the oars with her bound hands, trying to back-paddle, but she only succeeded in swinging the vessel sideways. She needed both oars. Needed both hands.

Reaching up, she wrenched the gag from her mouth, then bit at the knot binding her wrists, but it was tied too tight.

Bermin let go of the rope.

Bending her knees, Zarrah jumped, fingers catching the edge of the pier, the current dragging at her feet and trying to pull her loose.

Zarrah struggled to keep her grip on the wet rock. *Climb*, she ordered herself. *Get your leg up*. But then she felt warm breath against her bare

hands. “Bermin,” she gasped. “I know you hate me, but think of Valcotta. Think of the lives that could be saved if she were removed from power.”

Her cousin’s dark eyes regarded her for a long moment, and then he whispered, “I agree, little Zarah. Valcotta needs fresh blood on the throne to keep it strong.” A knife appeared in his hand, and he sliced through the bindings on her wrists before straightening to his feet. Zarah sucked in a breath of relief as she steadied her grip on the edge, about to pull herself upward.

“But it won’t be you.” Bermin’s boot lifted, then came down with crushing force on her fingers.

Zarah screamed as she lost her grip and frigid water closed over her head, the current immediately dragging her backward.

Swim.

Her legs churned, driving her to the surface, only for panic to flood her veins as the current took her toward the opening in the cliffs. Her eyes fixed on her cousin, who stood with his arms crossed as she was sucked into the devil’s maw.