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KNIGHT

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KNIGHT

G.A. AIKEN



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PART 1

PROLOGUE

As soon as Brother Gemma led her platoon of monk-knights into the monastery courtyard of the Order of Righteous Valor, she knew she was in for some horseshit.

Not hard to figure out. When one was part of a brotherhood of vicious, violent, and war god-loving warriors, one learned to sense when the winds of change had shifted.

She stopped her horse in the middle of the courtyard and examined the area. Her squire, Samuel, stopped next to her.

“Everything all right?” he asked.

“No.”

“Is there something I should be panicking about? I’m very good at panicking.”

She already realized that, but at least the boy knew himself well.

“I don’t think there’s a reason to panic.” At least not yet.

She dismounted from her horse and handed the reins to Samuel.

“Dagger did well, didn’t he?” the boy asked, petting her horse’s muzzle.

Gemma had been forced to replace her beloved mare just two months back. She still missed Kriegszorn, but Dagger had proven his worth in battle.

“Dagger has done very well. Your suggestion was a good one.”

“Thank you, Brother.”

The small, tentative smile on Samuel’s face suddenly faded and Gemma knew that, yes, those winds of change had definitely shifted.

She turned and saw Master Sergeant Alesandro walking up to her.

“Brother Gemma.”

“Brother Alesandro.”

“Your presence has been requested in the Chamber of Valor.”

“Why?”

It amused her to see Alesandro’s left eye twitch simply because she insisted on asking “why.” That’s why she asked “why.” Just to watch that left eye twitch.

“Because it’s an order,” he told her.

“But you said request. A request is not an order. An order is an order. A request is more of an option, so I ask why to find out if it’s something I really want to do. And quite honestly it’s—”

“*Brother Gemma!*”

Gemma blinked. Twice. “Yes, sir?”

He pointed at the monastery.

“So it *is* an order? Fair enough.”

She faced Samuel. “Bed down Dagger for the night, would you, Samuel?”

“Of course, Brother.”

She gave him a wink so he wouldn’t worry—even though she knew he would anyway—and headed toward the monastery.

Alesandro followed right behind, which didn’t concern her. He always acted as if she was about to make a wild run for it. He seemed to continually expect the worst from her. She wasn’t quite sure why, other than he simply didn’t like her. But that was his choice. She knew that not everyone was going to like her. She was fine with that. She was a war monk. She rode into battle and cut down her enemies without a thought. She and the platoon she led had just cut down an entire band of thieves that had been attacking undefended villages. She still had blood on her face and hands. With that going on in the world, why would she care if the master sergeant of her monastery liked her or not? She was more concerned about whether she’d managed to keep her knights alive.

She had. What else mattered?

They arrived at the Chamber of Valor, one of their most important rooms in the monastery, and Gemma walked in. She immediately assessed what she saw before her.

Grand elders were in attendance. Monks who worked directly with the grand master of their order on important decisions. Also waiting were her three battle-cohorts, Katla, Kir, and Shona. Bound together from day one, the four of them had trained together since they were novitiates, had experienced their first battles together, had risen through the ranks together, and to this day were as close as four people could be after washing pieces of their enemy's brains out of one another's hair.

Last of those awaiting Gemma's arrival were several generals, including the dreaded Lady Ragna. The monk-knights called her "Lady" Ragna because she was not a lady and they all hated her. Not exactly a joke that played well but few cared. Whenever the woman walked by, the area cleared like rats running from a burning forest. The only ones who didn't run were the monk-knights chosen for Ragna's army. She had her own legion, used only when called upon by the grand master and elders.

And then there was Brother Sprenger and a few of his minions. Sprenger hated Gemma, so she was surprised to see him here. Unless he had another complaint to lodge against her. Over the years, he'd had quite a few of those. So many she barely noticed them anymore. They came in scrolls and she had to listen while a general informed her of what she'd done wrong. When it was over, she'd put the scroll in a box. One day she planned to piss on that box, but not yet. She wanted something substantial to piss on. A real tower of piss-scrolls.

Gemma took her place beside her battle-cohorts, bracing her legs apart, clasping her hands behind her back. She waited while one of the generals began to drone on about . . . something. She honestly wasn't paying attention. Life was too short to be this bored.

Finally, after a good thirty minutes—she hadn't even had a bath yet! Did they not see she'd just come back from another hard-won battle? Couldn't all this have waited until she had gotten the blood of her enemies out of her hair? It was so damn sticky! She wanted nothing more than to scratch her scalp with both hands!—the general got to the point.

"On this day, we brothers are here to advance you cohorts from

lieutenants to majors and to grant upon you all the benefits that accompany said advancement.”

Huh. Look at that. She was getting a promotion. That was nice.

“Please, Brother Shona, Brother Kir, Brother Gemma, and Brother Katla, repeat after me—”

“Wait!” a voice rang out.

Brother Thomassin, an elder, looked up from the important missives he’d been reading during this whole boring ordeal. “Brother Sprenger?”

Sprenger walked into the center of the chamber and stood there a moment for maximum effect before announcing, “I refuse to sanction this advancement for Brother Gemma.”

Thomassin stood so fast, his chair skidded back, nearly knocking out his poor assistant, which was actually kind of funny because the man was six-five and nearly three hundred pounds. He’d fought in more wars than Gemma could count. But then so had Thomassin.

Gemma’s battle-cohorts didn’t hide their annoyance either. They dropped their proper “listening to their superiors” poses and stood ready to argue with anyone and everyone.

The only one who didn’t react much was Ragna. Although she did smirk. The bitch.

“She is *not* ready for such an advancement and if you insist on this course,” Sprenger continued, “I will be forced to take this to the grand master.”

“Excellent,” Thomassin shot back. “Why don’t we all take it to the grand master this very minute? I’m sure he’d love to hear your reasons as to why—”

“It’s okay.”

The brothers stopped arguing and everyone focused on her.

“What was that, Brother Gemma?” Thomassin asked.

“I said it’s okay, Brother Thomassin.” She shrugged. “I’ll wait until next time.”

“No,” Katla pushed. “You will *not* wait until next time. We all go now or we all wait—”

“Do not get hysterical.”

“I am *not* hysterical. I’m pissed.”

“If you don’t get the rank now,” Shona reminded her, “you’ll have to wait another five years before you’ll be eligible again.”

Gemma shrugged. “Those are the rules.”

“How are you okay with this?” Kir asked. “I’m not okay with this.”

“But I am okay with it.” And she really was. Of course, the reason she was okay with it was because—

“How is that possible?” Sprenger asked, now standing right in front of her, leaning in close to ask her the question. “Are you plotting something?”

That was such a weird, insane question. “Plotting what? What is there to plot?”

“Your battle-cohorts will be advancing. You will not.”

“And yet . . . life goes on. Amazing, isn’t it? For example, we had this pig—”

“Pig?”

“Yes. And Daddy loved that pig. He didn’t think he’d ever get over the death of it. But the pig had piglets. And soon, he had to go on. Because there were piglets to take care of. You see?”

Gemma let her smile fade and she began to frown, focusing her gaze on his jaw.

“Brother Sprenger . . . is that a rash?”

“What?” he asked, leaning away from her.

“Yes. Right . . .” She took her middle finger and forefinger and slid them along her own jawline. “Here.”

He instinctively slapped his hand over the old wound, his glare for her and her alone. When her smile returned, wider and—she was sure—brighter than before, he took that same hand and pulled it back as if to backhand her.

“Brother Sprenger!” Thomassin barked, stopping Sprenger before he did something he could not come back from.

“I was just going to suggest a good healer in town who can help with that sort of rash, Brother,” Gemma lied. She shrugged and looked to Brother Thomassin and the other elders. “Since I am no longer needed here . . . ?”

Angry and frustrated for Gemma but not wanting to turn the situation into a bigger dilemma than it already was, Thomassin dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Gemma gave her cohorts a wink and, with a miming action of her hands, a promise of celebratory drinks of ale later that night, she removed herself from the Chamber of Valor.

But before she'd taken three steps toward higher floors and the sleeping cells of the brothers, she was picked up by one of the grand master's assistants and carried to his private study like a sack of rye.

"Is this necessary?" she asked the man. "I could have walked."

The assistant knocked once on the door to the study and brought her inside, placing her in front of the grand master's desk. He then quickly walked out, closing the door behind him.

"I'm assuming you wanted to see me?"

Busy writing on a parchment, he told her to wait by gesturing with a flick of his hand. Gemma went across the room to the small statues standing on one of the many bookshelves and picked up a representation of the war god Morthwyl that one of the monks had created out of stone. Although they respected and called to many war gods in their prayers, it was Morthwyl who was their main deity. It was his name they called when they rode into battle. It was his table they hoped to feast at when they died a death of honor and blood.

"Stop playing with that."

Gemma put the war god she'd been using to attack another war god back in its place on the shelf. "Sorry."

"I saw the seer today."

"The pretty blond one? Or the old hag? Or the one with the twelve kids? Or the one who said she ate her twin while still in her mother's womb? Or the one who controls fire?"

"No. Gary the sorcerer."

"Ohhh. Yes, of course."

"He has some terrifying information about the future of our brotherhood. Some of which, not surprisingly, involves Brother Sprenger."

"But Sprenger started it."

The grand master stopped writing and looked up from his parchment. "Sprenger started what?"

Gemma blinked. "Nothing."

"Gemma."

“Joshua.”

In this room, when they were alone . . . she could call the grand master “Joshua.” He’d been her mentor since the beginning. Before he’d become grand master. The one who’d guided her through all the tough times, had been there when she wasn’t sure she could make it through. But mentor and mentee didn’t really describe their relationship; it was deeper even than that. Did that mean she took Joshua for granted? No. She would not ask him for anything she didn’t think she deserved. Nor would she ask him to fight for her over something as ridiculous as rank. They didn’t waste their relationship on horseshit. It was too important to both of them.

“So what did the seer want to tell you?”

He motioned to the chair across from his desk and Gemma dropped into it.

“The Old King will die soon.”

“Good.”

“Yes.”

“But I guess that means one of his idiot sons will replace him?”

That’s when Joshua stared at her for a long moment.

“What?” she asked when he didn’t reply.

“The seer actually sees a different ruler.”

“Oooh. Interesting. Someone we can fight for? Or someone we’re going to have to kill? I’ll be honest . . . I’m not sure which I hope for. Both sound intriguing.”

“I honestly don’t know the answer to that question. Because the ruler he sees, Gemma . . . is your sister.”

Truly confused, she could only ask, “Sister? Which sister? I have a lot of sisters. And brothers and cousins and aunts, uncles—”

“Beatrice.”

She gazed at her mentor for longer than she meant to. She gazed and gazed until it happened all at once. The laughter exploded out of her so hard that she ended up on the floor, rolling around in her blood-covered tunic and chainmail, barely able to stop herself from pissing on it as well. It went on for ages, Gemma unable to stop herself, even as tears streamed down her face and her laughter turned into desperate coughs and struggling for air.

But, eventually, she noticed that Joshua did not join in with her laughter. Unlike most of the brotherhood, Joshua did enjoy a good

laugh from time to time. So when he didn't this time, she forced herself back into the chair and asked while she wiped her tears and gave a few remaining chuckles, "You are kidding, aren't you?"

When he did not reply with a very strong, "Of course I am!" Gemma's laughter died in her throat, along with a bit of her soul.

"Beatrix can't be queen," she argued. "She's a child."

"To be queen or king, she just has to be out of the womb."

"She has no training."

"To be a royal? She could be a head in a jar and still be an effective royal."

"But I hate her."

"Unfortunately, I don't think that fact will come into play."

"It should. It should be the most important thing in the universe."

"You know we're monks, yes? Humility and all that."

"We're not just monks," she reminded him. "We're *war* monks. There's no humility. There's swords and blood and, if we're lucky, very good ale. So what do you want me to do about my sister? Have my parents send her to a nunnery, which I have been suggesting since shortly after her birth?"

Once more, Joshua simply gazed at her without speaking.

"What is that look on your face? Why do you just keep staring at me like that? What aren't you telling me?"

"This isn't about your sister being inadequate to lead, Gemma. In fact, the seer seems to think Beatrix will be more than ready to lead as queen."

"Oh." She shrugged. "Fine. Then what's the problem?"

"There is concern about what your sister will do once she's in power."

"Because she's a woman?" There had never been a woman who'd led these lands as queen. Only kings born into certain bloodlines or men willing to take the crown.

"No. Because she might be missing a soul."

Gemma frowned. "Literally . . . or figuratively?"

"Either or both. It's unclear at this point. But the brotherhood is not willing to take the risk."

Sitting up straight in her chair, Gemma asked, "Exactly what does that mean?"

He rested his arms on his desk. "Plans are already in motion."

"Plans? What plans?"

"To kill your sister."

"You're going to kill my sister?"

"It's not my preferred choice, but I don't make these kinds of decisions alone. And you know that."

"The elders. They've decided to kill a child."

"She's of age, Gemma. And it's what we do."

"You don't know my family. They won't let this happen."

"That's why you need to leave. Now. Go home. Save your family."

"But Thomassin? Bartholemew? Brín? They all agreed to this as well?"

"It was decided it would be easier to send you home on your own to get to your sister than to try to stop the rest of the elders here. They would just go around us. At least this way, with your help, your sister will have a chance of being saved."

"But the elders were just trying to—"

"Advance your rank?"

"Yes." She lifted her hands but quickly dropped them. Sighed. "But Sprenger stopped them."

Joshua laughed. "He's such an idiot. If he knew why they were advancing your rank, he would have let it go through. The plan was for you to be sent out on a mission with your fancy new rank. And while you were gone—"

"A separate unit would go kill my sister."

"Unfortunate but accurate. But I'm not going to let that happen. Any of it. Go save your sister. Put her in hiding. When it all blows over, she can either be queen or go back to her normal boring life with both of you hating each other."

"But if I do this . . . won't I be betraying the brotherhood?"

"You'll be leaving on my orders. They'll know that . . . eventually."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better."

Joshua chuckled. "What have I always told you, spoiled child?"

"We have to play this smart," she said in a high-pitched voice that always made him laugh.

“Now go. Your squire is waiting with your horses by the hidden tunnel in the stables. You can get out that way.”

“Samuel can’t come. That isn’t fair to him.”

“Gemma, he hates it here. He’d rather risk his life with you than stay here in safety.”

“I’m going back to the family farm, Joshua,” she said, standing. “I doubt there will be much danger as long as my dad’s pigs don’t get out of the sty again and chase the children.”

CHAPTER 1

Two years later . . .

Gemma Smythe raised her shield against the sword battering against it, again and again. When the blows weakened, she swung the shield wide. The soldier attacking her was thrown off, and Gemma moved in, slamming her sword into his side. She yanked it out, and thrust again, this time into his bowels. She tore him open and let his insides spill out before kicking him in the chest to send him spinning away.

Another attacking soldier slipped in his friend's entrails and went down. Gemma finished him off quickly, removing his head. Then she used that head to distract the soldier behind him by kicking it into his face. She turned away once her own men swarmed the soldier and took him down.

Gemma wiped blood from her eyes and evaluated the battle going on around her.

Annoyed when she didn't see what she wanted, Gemma belted, "Find the duke and his wife! If they're here, get them!"

The soldiers she led ran off to do her bidding but the Amichai, now loyal to Keeley, suddenly surrounded her, their war kilts, weapons, and themselves covered in the blood and gore of the enemy.

She studied the group surrounding her before calmly asking the one standing right next to her, "What the fuck are you doing?"

That smile. That smile she loathed with such venom flashed. "Protecting *you*, my princess."

“Call me that one more time . . .” she warned through gritted teeth, causing his smile to grow. She forced herself to calm down. “You should be protecting Keeley. Not me.”

“But she sent us to you, my lady. She’s quite concerned with your safety and we are here to serve and protect. We wouldn’t want her sister struck down at such a young age, now would we?”

Gemma faced the one being she could barely tolerate. “Why?” she asked him. “Why do you go out of your way to irritate me?”

“I’m following orders. Isn’t that what you told me to do? Follow orders? To the letter, I believe, was your command.”

He was playing *that* game, was he? A game she’d played herself a few times when a monk from another monastery tried to take over her own. But those monks always thought they knew better, that their orders were more important than those of her grand master. It had been Gemma’s pleasure to take them down simply by following their orders . . . maliciously.

The Amichai was being unfair, though. She wasn’t some grabby monk in search of power. She was simply attempting to protect her eldest sister, Keeley. The gods-damn queen. At least one of the queens.

For a land that had never had a queen leading it, there were now two. Queen Beatrix, who led beside her husband, King Marius, and Queen Keeley, who led beside no one.

It seemed as if Gary the seer had been right about Beatrix. She was a soulless bitch who would do anything to be queen, even if that meant wiping out her entire family to make it happen. Luckily for the family and for the people, Keeley wasn’t about to let that happen.

At the moment, their world was split into east and west. Keeley was queen of the western lands, including the Hill Lands. King Marius, ruler of the east.

Many believed that Beatrix was merely a royal womb for Marius to plant his seed in, but Gemma and Keeley knew better. Their sister hadn’t done all this *not* to have the true power of the crown. She would simply have to find a way to manipulate her husband as she manipulated everyone else in her life.

Gemma didn’t doubt for a second her younger sister had already found a way to make that happen. But she couldn’t worry

about Beatrix right now. Not in the middle of a battle with an idiot grinning at her.

“No,” Gemma finally stated, pointing across the battlefield to the only queen she cared about at the moment. The one who refused to listen to reason and stay on royal lands as Gemma had strongly suggested. The one who was busy wielding her ridiculous hammer as soldier after soldier attacked her, all of them hoping to be the one to take the queen down and win the rewards promised to them by the remaining sons of the Old King. “Do you not see that the queen is in peril?”

“She has my brother and my sister fighting at her side. What more could she need? Besides, her orders were quite clear, Princess. She wanted me to protect *you*. You poor, weak thing.”

If her fingers weren't holding her sword, she'd curl them into a fist and throttle him. Instead, though, she used her annoyance to cut her way through the ongoing battle, making a path straight to her sister, Queen Keeley of the Hill Lands.

“Oy!” she barked at her royal majesty. “Did you send him to me?”

Keeley Smythe, Gemma's eldest sister and, at one time, the ruler of all eleven of their parents' offspring, was busy battering at the enemy commander with her favorite hammer.

“Keeley!”

Keeley's big shoulders jerked in surprise and she yanked up her weapon, sending an arc of fresh blood Gemma's way. But she was quick and moved to the side so that it hit the Amichai right in the face. His glare was worth *everything*.

“What?” Keeley demanded, stepping away from her opponent's caved-in chest. “What you yelling at me for?”

Gemma waved her sword at Quinn of the Scarred Earth Clan, enjoying the way his head jerked back when the blade got a little too close to that pretty but blood-soaked face.

“I said, did you send him to me?”

“You were all alone.”

“And you thought *he* could help?”

“I'm helpful,” the Amichai argued.

The sisters looked at him, then looked back at each other.

“What's really going on?” Gemma asked Keeley.

“What are you talking about?”

“You send this idiot to me—”

“That’s a little mean,” he muttered.

“You didn’t even tell me about today’s battle—”

“Well—”

“And where’s my battalion?”

“Now you ask?”

“What does that mean?”

“You seem tense,” her sister said. She took a step back, looked Gemma over. “Your shoulders are tense. Your neck tight. You’re doing that thing again with your posture. Want me to fix that for you?”

Gemma would never understand her sister.

“I’m not a horse!” she snapped.

Keeley frowned. “Uh . . . I know. Wait . . . *are you?* Is that what you’re saying?”

The Amichai snorted, quickly turning away so Keeley wouldn’t see him laugh. Gemma could only gawk at her.

“What?”

“It’s possible. I was too young to remember your birth. Maybe Mum just snuck you in.”

“I’m saying you can’t just fix me because I’m *not* one of your bloody horses!”

“Oh! That’s what you mean.”

“What did you think I meant?”

“I really didn’t know. Things with you have been . . . difficult. Since . . . well . . .” She gestured at Gemma and Gemma looked down at the chainmail and bits of armor that her mother had made for her many months ago.

She lifted her gaze to her sister’s. “Since . . . when?” she asked.

“Uh . . .” Keeley looked at Quinn but he quickly turned away again.

“I’m not part of this conversation,” he explained to them. “Instead, I’m looking meaningfully off”—he motioned with his entire left arm, gesturing out, his four fingers pointing, the thumb tucked in against his hand—“that way.”

“Since when?” Gemma pushed, now ignoring the battle going on around them.

“Since . . .” Again, Keeley gestured at Gemma’s entire body.
“This.”

She wanted her sister to say it. Out loud. For everyone to hear it.

“This? What’s this?”

“You know.”

“No. I’m unclear.”

“Uh . . .”

Keeley suddenly reached behind her and when she swung her arm back, she held their cousin Keran. She was more than a decade older than the two of them and a bit of a black sheep because she wasn’t a blacksmith like the rest of their mother’s side of the family, but had belonged to a fighting guild. She wore the scars of those years quite proudly—since she was still alive. She’d even managed to retire while still able to stand and walk on her own. That was mostly unheard of when it came to the fighting guilds.

“Ale time?” Keran asked when she stood in front of her cousins.

“No,” Gemma snapped, disgusted. “We’re not done yet.”

“Oh. Then what do you want? I was in the middle of killing.”

“Keeley needs you to say what she’s too afraid to say.”

“Keeley’s never afraid to say anything. Just this morning she asked her mum if she’s pregnant again or if her ass is just getting wide. I don’t know anyone else brave enough to ask *your* mother if her ass is just getting wide.”

Gemma leaned around Keran to view her sister. “Tell me that woman is not pregnant again.”

“I think her ass is just getting wide.”

Relieved, Gemma leaned back and said to Keran, “Well, she’s afraid to tell me something.”

“About the snarling? The snapping? The way no one can talk to you anymore?”

“That’s quite a list, Cousin.”

“Or are we talking about the drinking?”

“*The drinking?*”

Considering there were nightly bets among the troops on how fast the queen’s cousin could down a pint of ale, Gemma was a little insulted that anyone was questioning her occasional drink. Especially if that questioning was coming from gods-damn Keran of all people!

“All right then!” Keeley cheered.

“Oh, wait,” Keran went on, “or is this about—”

“Thank you, Keran!” Keeley said, casually tossing their cousin back into the ongoing battle.

Their cousin wasn't a small woman but she flew like a leaf on the wind, landed on her feet, and immediately began hacking away with her axe at the closest enemy soldier without even missing a step.

Gemma moved up to her sister, raising her chin so she could at least attempt to look Keeley in the eyes. “My drinking? What drinking?”

“You know what I need you to do, luv?” Keeley asked with her big smile and adorable charm. She pointed at the duke's castle. “Look in there. See if the duke and duchess have left us anything.”

“You're just trying to get rid of me.”

“Would I do that to you?”

“As a matter of fact—”

The queen didn't even let her finish. She just spun her around and shoved, sending Gemma off in the direction of the castle.

It was humiliating.

“Why are you back here?” Quinn's brother, Caid, asked.

“I was keeping an eye on Princess Bitchy Leggings as the queen asked me to do. But she is in a mood. I'd be better in a fighting pit, unarmed and naked.”

“I didn't think she was coming today.”

“Apparently that plan changed and the enemy has been paying for it ever since. She's just been lopping off heads all day. I shouldn't mind but it seems so senseless.”

Caid shrugged. “At least she's on our side.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt you two,” said their sister, Laila, as she used a spear to fight off their enemies. “But do you two mind assisting in keeping the queen alive? She's all alone over there!”

Quinn and his brother looked over at Keeley Smythe, Queen of the Hill Lands.

She was swinging her hammer wide, knocking down three attacking soldiers. She then lifted her hammer up and over, massive, sweat-covered muscles rippling as she brought the weapon down,

crushing the soldier into the ground. When she buried the head of her hammer into another soldier's chest—crumpling the steel armor that had been protecting it—the brothers looked back at their sister.

“Are we worried about her?” Quinn asked his sister. “Really?”

Impaling a soldier through his helmet, Laila snapped, “All right, listen up. You two seem to forget who you actually report to since you”—she pointed at Caid with her blood-soaked steel spear—“are lucky enough to fuck the queen. And you”—she pointed at Quinn—“have been lucky enough not to be executed by the queen. So I'll make it very clear. The only one either of you takes orders from . . . is *me*.”

“Because you're Mother's direct heir? Or Father's favorite?”

“Both, which is why I rule you two *like a god*.”

“She'll be a tyrant one day,” Quinn muttered to Caid.

“Now Caid, go to Keeley. You lot with him,” she ordered, motioning to the other Amichais fighting nearby. “And Quinn—”

“Please don't send me after—”

“You go with Gemma.”

He dropped his head forward. “She hates me. I don't mean that lightly. I mean she really hates me.”

“You love it when others hate you.”

He shrugged. “True.”

“Then go. And watch your back. We're not done here yet.” His sister looked around, her gaze narrow. “Something feels off.”

His sister was never wrong about that sort of thing. She was a centaur, and like any true herd animal, she had the strong senses that kept them safe and alive. Because she could smell danger on the wind and sense trouble through her hooves.

So Quinn stopped questioning her and simply followed the terse princess who was abusing their enemies so brutally. He was truly concerned she might one day be convicted of war crimes by her own sister.

Gemma battered her way through the ongoing battle to the open gates of the duke's castle. They weren't under a royal siege because he and his wife had sided with Queen Beatrix and her idiot husband, but because they'd raised an army to assist in the

oncoming war between the two queendoms. That was something even Keeley wouldn't overlook.

What Gemma hadn't expected, though, was that Keeley would attack Duke Reinhold preemptively, rather than waiting for his power to grow. Keeley usually preferred diplomacy to war. Maybe their mother had said something to her, because Gemma had woken up this morning to find her sister and her army already moving out.

Why Keeley hadn't alerted Gemma to her decision earlier, Gemma still didn't know, and their earlier conversation with Keran hadn't helped matters. The battalion that reported to Gemma was still at the homestead with the family. Gemma, however, would prefer they were here. She'd been training them for this sort of fighting. To attack fast and hard, under the cover of darkness, giving their enemies no time to put up a proper defense or offense. It was a brutal, unfair tactic, but if they were going to win against Beatrix and the son of the Old King, they'd have to stop thinking like fair-minded individuals and start thinking like men.

A hysterical soldier ran toward her screaming and Gemma turned, brought her sword up and across, splitting the man open from just below his left shoulder, through part of his chest, to the other side of his neck, sending the man's head—and a large chunk of his upper body—flipping up and away as the rest of his body dropped before it reached her.

Gemma drove her sword into another oncoming soldier, then pushed him out of her way. She kept moving, entering the castle walls without any of the other enemy soldiers following her. She had expected to find a battle inside. Men defending the duke and his family. But she soon realized that the royals had made a quick exit from their old home, probably heading toward Beatrix's lands.

Although Gemma would have preferred to get her hands on the duke, this situation was tolerable. Keeley's army was decimating the duke's army and without any of his soldiers, he would be of little use to Beatrix and her husband. That worked just as well as taking the duke captive.

Keeping her sword at the ready, Gemma moved among the remains of the duke's home. She had no use for the things he'd left behind. A few objects of actual gold and steel and silver would be

taken and given to their mother to be made into weapons by the blacksmith. But Gemma was looking for more. She was looking for information. Anything that could help them in their ongoing battle with Beatrix.

Far in the back of the castle, she found a room with several large tables. On them were maps and communications on parchment between the duke and King Marius, also known as Marius, the Wielder of Hate. Without meaning to, Gemma again found herself grudgingly worried about Beatrix being the wife of a man infamous for his brutality and heartless nature. It irritated her that she cared at all. Clearly Beatrix hadn't cared about family when she'd buried her blade in Keeley's gut. Her own sister. And for what? A chance at being queen? Keeley had spent her entire life caring for Beatrix. Taking care of her, giving her money, making sure she had all the books she could possibly want and, most importantly, ignoring the obvious fact that Beatrix was an evil bitch who should have been put down at birth the same way they put down diseased pigs on their farm.

Yet despite knowing all that, Gemma still found herself worrying about Beatrix. Worrying about the life she was living with someone like Marius. And she hated herself a little for giving a horse's shit one way or the other. Beatrix didn't deserve Gemma's worry. She didn't deserve anything except a blade to the neck. Not that Keeley would ever let that happen.

"We should burn this place to the ground," a voice said from behind her, "so they can never return."

Gemma gripped her blade tighter but did not turn around.

"I wish you would stop sneaking up on me."

"I didn't sneak up on you. It's my legs."

Confused by that statement, she finally turned to face Quinn.

"What?"

"It's my legs." He looked down at the long, muscular legs that stretched from under the leather kilt that every battle-ready Amichai wore. There were small scars over the length of each leg but on his left one was a very long, very jagged scar that reached from behind his knee around to the front of the thigh and up, until it disappeared under his kilt. "When I only have two, I seem to move very lightly. I barely make any sound at all." He gazed at her

a long moment before continuing. “But when I add the other two—and hooves, of course—then suddenly I end up making much more noise than I mean to. Unless I wrap my hooves in cloth. Then my stride is less noisy.”

He stopped again . . . and gazed at her before finally finishing with, “I’m always surprised you humans aren’t quieter when you move. You only have two legs. How hard is it?”

It was still strange for her. Even now. To have these discussions with the Amichais. To say out loud that no, they weren’t human. They were centaurs who merely took on human form when they wished. Sometimes Gemma walked into her sister’s bedchamber and found Caid of the Scarred Earth Clan complaining about something minor while his long black tail swatted at one of the stray cats that roamed the castle walls and liked to hang from the Amichais’ tails. He didn’t even seem to notice he was doing it. Nor did he notice the kittens climbing his horse legs. And Keeley, who sat on the bed, listening to his complaints and petting a baby goat, didn’t seem to notice or care either. That’s when Gemma knew life among the Smythe clan had well and truly changed.

“Are you still following me?” she asked Quinn, whose white-blond hair often made her think the gods had gone out of their way to make him the exact opposite of his black-haired brother, Caid.

“I’m only here because I was ord—”

“If you say ‘ordered’ one . . . more . . . *time* . . .”

“So I can’t say ‘ordered’ or ‘princess’? And yet you are a princess who I was ordered to follow.”

Gemma stepped around him. “Fuck off, Amichai. I have no time for you or . . .”

Gemma’s complaint faded when the Amichai moved past her and stopped, his head tilting one way, then the other. He heard something. Was trying to follow the sound.

“This way,” he barked before setting off.

Gemma immediately followed. Together, they made their way deep into the empty castle, cutting through the kitchens and out an exit into the open fields. A dangerous way to live, with no protection at one’s back like a small courtyard.

She stood next to Quinn, sweeping her gaze across the grassy, open area until she saw him. His bright yellow robes flapped as he

desperately ran toward the castle while a man on horseback charged after him, his big axe ready to remove the runner's head.

"Do you know either?" Quinn asked her.

"The one in robes is a monk. A pacifist order that does no harm to any. I don't recognize the armor of the other."

"Good enough," Quinn said as he unslung the longbow strapped across his chest and pulled an arrow from the leather quiver hanging from his sword belt. He nocked the arrow, aimed, and released.

The hit was direct, in the chest, taking the rider right off his horse.

As much as Quinn annoyed her, Gemma couldn't ignore the Amichai's skill with a longbow, only rivaled by his sister, who used a composite bow as if it were an extension of her arm.

Still, Gemma wasn't about to tell Quinn any of that. He was arrogant enough already.

Gemma brought two fingers to her mouth and whistled. Quickly, as if he'd just been waiting for her call, Gemma's horse trotted through the castle and into the field, stopping right beside her.

Dagger tossed his black mane, which had been braided into four thick plaits so it didn't get in his way during battle, and pounded his front hoof against the ground. She mounted him with ease and clucked her tongue against the top of her mouth once. Dagger galloped toward the hysterical man still running toward them. As they neared, Quinn heard his screams for help as the monk stumbled, fell, then got back to his feet again.

Gemma reached him first and when she stopped, the man dropped to his knees beside her.

"Please! Don't hurt me! Please! I am a pacifist monk! I am a pacifist monk!" he screamed. Begging.

Gemma stared down at him.

"I know what you are, Brother. I won't hurt you. No soldier should be hurting you. They should only come to your monastery for healing and care. As a sanctuary."

Still on his knees, the monk shook his head.

"They've killed them all!" he screeched. "All of them! They've killed every one!"

Gemma glanced off, her brows pulled low, her blue eyes dark, her expression unreadable. Quinn watched her closely, curious to see what she would do. When monks from different orders passed through their town, Gemma wasn't exactly welcoming. At best, she simply ignored them. At worst, there were nasty fights in the nearby taverns that ended with her getting sewn up the next day and refusing to discuss the cause of the brawl.

But this felt different.

After a moment, Gemma looked over her shoulder and pointed at a unit of Keeley's soldiers.

"You lot!" she called out. "With us!" Gemma held out her hand and the monk grabbed it. She hauled him onto Dagger's back and set the horse racing forward. Quinn followed.

When they reached the nearby monastery, the monk immediately slipped off Dagger. He walked to the open front doors, dropped to his knees in his gratingly cheery bright yellow robes, clenched his hands together, focused his eyes on the brilliant sky above, and unleashed prayers that were no more than sobbing cries to his god.

Not knowing how to respond, Quinn passed him without a word and entered the monastery.

Gemma had already beat him inside and was now in the main hall. She was already down on one knee, the tip of her blade pressed against the stone floor, her right hand gripping the pommel; her head bowed in prayer.

He understood why. It was a normal reaction for anyone who'd given their life over to the gods, which she had. Although in the last fourteen months, few could tell. He clearly remembered that morning when he'd walked by her bedroom to see her packing away her monk's robes and chainmail and weapons in a trunk at the end of her bed. Her mother had then outfitted her in all new gear, made just for her by the renowned blacksmith, but it wasn't the same, was it? Seeing her in mere warrior's garb. Not to Quinn anyway. He was used to seeing the queen's sister striding around in her black tunic with the blood-red rune emblazoned on the front and back, and the exquisitely made black chainmail that proclaimed she was the warrior of a god.

Quinn didn't know what had happened. What had made her

take off her robes and stop answering to the title Brother Gemma, and he didn't ask. Although he loved tormenting her, it had never felt right to play with her about something like that. Gods were a personal thing.

But seeing her on one knee, her sword held tight in her hand, and her head bowed . . . With or without her robes, Quinn knew that she had not truly left her gods behind. How could she when faced with something like this?

Because they were all dead. All of them. Every monk who'd been in the monastery was dead; their broken and bleeding bodies piled high in the middle of the hall. Some tied to pillars and riddled with crossbow bolts. Most of the bodies bore signs of torture before death.

There was so much blood. He'd only seen this much blood on battlefields.

Gemma finished her prayer and stood, turning to face him.

"These monks," she said softly, keeping her voice low in deference to the dead, "like the one outside, were not war monks. They were pacifist monks. They were here to help the weak and suffering. This place was a sanctuary for any who came here for help. Even the Old King never crossed that line. And he was known to cross almost every line."

"Why would your kind do this?"

She shook her head. "I can't speak for the ways of men, Amichai."

He frowned at her response. "I'm not speaking philosophically, woman. I mean *why* did they do this? Now?"

"Oh!" Gemma took a look around. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe because they could. With the battle for power going on, the attackers figured they could take whatever gold and silver they could find."

"You think thieves did this?"

"You don't?"

"Thieves usually just come in, take, then go. This . . . seems excessively cruel. Even for your kind. Don't you think?"

"I guess."

Quinn studied her. "You guess?"

"What do you want me to say, Amichai?"

He wanted her to say that she cared. He wanted her to say that

she would stop at nothing until she found out what had happened here. He wanted her to say she would track down the bastards who'd killed these defenseless monks, skin them alive, and place them assholes first on standing pikes. *That's* what he wanted to hear her say. Because that's what Brother Gemma would have said when he'd met her. But since she'd packed away her robes . . .

"I'm going to get your sister."

"For what?" Gemma asked. "It's disgusting thieves with no sense of honor. We'll bury the dead and be on our way."

"Och!"

Gemma blinked. "Did you just 'och' me?"

"I did. And I'll do it again." He leaned down, close to her face. "Och!"

"Oy! You spit in me eye!"

"Deserved. I'm getting your sister."

"She won't say anything different!" Gemma called after him. "You're being overly dramatic about *all* of this!"

Keeley took one turn around the room before she faced Gemma, spread her arms wide, and announced, "Thieves didn't do this."

Behind Keeley's back, Quinn mouthed, *Told you.*

If Gemma had long enough arms to slap him where he stood . . .

"This is the work of soldiers."

"We don't know that."

"Are you blind?" Keeley took another turn around the main hall, shaking her head and making distinct sounds of disgust; her brow furrowed. "This is so disturbing. Do you not find this disturbing?" Keeley asked. And, before Gemma could answer, "*How do you not find this disturbing?*" she bellowed.

"*I didn't say I don't find this disturbing!*"

"Where's the monk?" Keeley asked Quinn. Because suddenly they were friends.

"This way, Your Highness," Quinn said with a sweeping gesture of his arm.

Keeley walked past Gemma, not even looking at her. When Quinn followed, Gemma pulled back her arm to punch him on the side of the head but Caid caught hold and pulled her in the

opposite direction. They went into a small hallway, where he released her.

“What’s going on?”

“Your brother—”

“Other than that. What’s going on *here*?”

Gemma let out a sigh. “I don’t know. It looks like thieves to me.”

“Does it really? Usually you’re more paranoid than that.”

“I’m not paranoid.”

“Gemma, you’re the most paranoid person I know. And I know my father. And your uncle.”

Gemma briefly rubbed her forehead. “All right. Maybe I was a little dismissive. Normally I’d be a little more . . .”

“Questioning?”

“Yes.”

“So be questioning now. If my brother is asking questions . . . my *brother* . . . there must be something. Look around. Be the old you.”

“The old me?”

“You’ve been different lately.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “To be honest, you remind me of your cousin.”

“*Keran*?” she exploded. “I remind you of Keran?”

“Don’t know why you’re yelling. I like Keran.”

“That’s hardly the point.” Gemma looked away from the Amichai, dismissing him with a wave. “I . . . I . . . I’ll look around. See what I can find.”

“Great,” Caid said flatly. “Thanks.” He studied her for a moment. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Just . . . go.”

“Do you want me to find you some ale?”

Gemma glared up at him. “*No*. I do not want you to find me any ale. I do not *need* any ale.”

“No, no. Of course you don’t.”

Insulted by his tone, Gemma opened her mouth to reply but he’d already walked away. If he’d been in his natural form, she’d have kicked him in his horse rump.

No, she wouldn't do any of that. She needed to calm down. She needed to be rational.

If Caid thought something was strange about all this, he was probably right. Unlike his ridiculous brother, Caid was a thoughtful centaur. A good match for her sister, who thought this harsh world was filled with nothing but do-gooders wanting only the best for others.

She'd started to head down to the sleeping chambers, away from the main hall, when Laila came toward her. She was sliding her weapon back into its sheath when she stopped by Gemma's side.

"No one left alive. Only the monk. He's very lucky." She shook her head. "What happened here?"

"I have no idea. Caid wants me to take a look around."

"Good idea. Your sister is talking to the monk. And the troops are preparing burial pyres."

"Don't. The pacifists bury their dead. Tell the soldiers to dig graves."

"Why would anyone bury their dead?"

"It's something they do."

She scrunched up her face. "Ew."

"Try not to be so judgmental in front of the monk, please."

"Make sure I'm burned," Laila insisted. "I don't want to spend my afterlife rotting away in the dirt. With the bugs. Or if I can't be burned, leave me out for the elements. So I'm eaten by predators."

"Must we really have this conversation now?"

"Just making sure it's clear. You humans are . . . strange." She looked Gemma over. "You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You want some ale? I'm sure there's ale somewhere around here."

Gemma gritted her teeth. "I do not need ale. And the pacifist monks abstain."

"Seriously?"

"From ale and sex and violence. They avoid anything that might make one's cock hard."

"Ah. I see. Well . . . we'll be home soon enough." She patted Gemma on the shoulder and walked off.

Gemma briefly thought about screaming and tearing the walls of this pacifist house down around her ears but she would never disrespect another god's house of worship, whether she worshipped that god or not. Instead, she went on her search.

She searched and she searched. For nearly an hour. But she found nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. From what she could tell, the intruders had taken all the gold, all the silver, anything that might be worth something as any good thief or thieves would.

"I knew this was a waste of time."

She started toward the closest exit but stopped abruptly.

Gemma went over everything in her head one more time. Everything she'd seen or not seen during the time she'd been inside the monastery. That's when she knew what she'd missed. How blind she'd been.

"Fuck," she barked before she took off running. "Fuck!"

The graves had been dug and the troops were carefully laying the bodies of the brutalized brothers into the dirt while Keeley, Quinn, the Amichais, and the last remaining monk looked on.

That's when Gemma appeared out of nowhere, jumping in front of the easily startled monk.

"I need to talk to you," she said, grabbing him by the sleeve of his bright yellow robes and beginning to lead him off until Keeley pulled him away.

"What are you doing?" Keeley demanded.

"I need to talk to him."

Keeley, taller than her sister, leaned down a bit. "Can't this wait? We're burying his dead."

"This is important," Gemma replied.

"So's this."

"Back off."

"You back off!"

"What is going on?" Laila barked.

"I need to speak—"

"And I said it can wait."

"You can just ask," the monk said softly.

And Keeley actually looked as if she wanted to wring her younger sister's neck.

"The artifacts of the monastery," Gemma asked, "where are they?"

Staring at Gemma, the monk blinked. Once, twice. "We . . . we have no artifacts, my lady." And they all knew the monk was lying.

Gemma had no patience these days for poorly told lies, and she rolled her eyes in exasperation. Keeley, however, tried her ridiculous honesty.

"Brother, you can tell my sister anything."

"Keeley, stop."

"She's one of you," Keeley explained.

"One of us?" the monk asked.

"Keeley, stop talking."

"Aye! She's a monk from the Order of Righteous Valor."

The monk began to blink more. Actually, he blinked ten or twelve times in a row before he stumbled back, slamming into Caid.

"You . . . you're a . . . a . . . war monk?"

"Brother, please . . ." Gemma raised her hands, palms out. "Before you panic—"

"*War Monk!*" he screamed hysterically before running away.

Gemma briefly closed her eyes before turning on her sister.

"Why did you say anything?"

"Why do you belong to an organization that terrifies people?"

Fair question.

A fair question that Gemma didn't bother to answer. Instead, she ran after the monk.

"Well, don't chase after—"

When her sister ignored her, Keeley threw up her hands and charged after Gemma.

The Amichais looked at each other. Keeley was queen. Gemma was eldest sister to the queen. A princess. There were at least three units of soldiers burying bodies that could chase the monk from here all the way back to the Amichais' mountain home. And yet . . .

Laila and Caid focused on Quinn.

"Oh, come on!" he argued. "Why do I have to do it?"

"I don't feel like running," Laila replied.

"I don't want to," Caid growled.

“And you know what will happen once they catch up to each other. And that poor monk will die of a heart attack once he sees what those two can do to each other. We’ll never find out the answer to Gemma’s questions. So go,” Laila ordered, gesturing with both hands.

“Fuck.” He shifted to his natural form and took off after the sisters.

It wasn’t hard to find them. The monk’s yellow robes were as bright as the two suns. Gemma was nearly on him when Keeley tackled her from behind, the pair going down hard.

Quinn kept going, reaching the hysterical monk and grabbing him from behind. By the time he had the man under control, he was back to two legs so that when they were facing each other, the monk wouldn’t be any more frightened.

“Breathe,” he ordered the poor man. “Just breathe.”

“She’s a—”

“Yes. She is. But she won’t hurt you. I promise. On my life and the life of my people. Understand?”

The monk gawked at him for a long moment, but finally nodded.

“Now, she’s going to ask you questions, you’ll answer them . . . yes? You’ll help?”

“I will.”

“Good. Now . . .” Quinn looked over his shoulder; shook his head. “Give me a moment.”

He released the monk and returned to the sisters, grabbing them by the collars of their blood-encrusted chainmail shirts and pulling them to their feet. He yanked them apart and shook them for good measure.

“Stop it! You’re scaring the feeble monk!”

“I told you not to say anything!” Gemma felt the need to remind her sister, yet again.

“I still don’t understand why you’re part of a group that sends terror into anyone who even hears the words ‘war monk.’ As soon as they’re said, people piss themselves and run. Does that not concern you?”

“No! It does not concern me. Because our reputation was earned—”

“On the backs of dead babies?”

The slap across the queen’s face rang out through the land like the warning of a town bell; Quinn could actually feel it in his back teeth.

The women were at each other once more and he wasn’t even sure he wanted to attempt to separate them again. He didn’t want to risk important parts of his body. It was the monk who decided to intervene. Not with words or pleas, but a burst of bright energy that sent both females spiraling in opposite directions until they landed facedown in the dirt, gasping for breath, eyes wide in startled panic.

“My brothers are dead!” the monk nearly screamed. “And you two royals attack each other like feckless harpies!” Tears began to stream down his face but they seemed more from despair and frustration than fear. “Both of you, stop it!”

He looked away and wiped his tears with the sleeve of his yellow robe. “Now ask me your question, War Monk.”

Panting hard, but not from her fight with her sister, Gemma got to her feet. She brushed off her knees and asked, “Where did your order keep your artifacts? Your *true* artifacts.”

The pacifist monk studied her hard before replying, “There are several locations in the monastery—”

“I could be wrong, Brother, but I’m almost positive they’re not there anymore.”

“What?”

When Gemma took a step forward, the monk took a step back, so she stopped.

“I think whoever attacked your monastery tortured your elders because they wanted your artifacts. Not your gold. Not your silver. They wanted your power.”

“How powerful could pacifist monks be?” Quinn asked.

“Well,” Gemma grudgingly admitted, glancing down at the dirt and scrapes she’d gotten from her tumble across the ground, “consider the power we just experienced from this monk, who I’m guessing worked in the”—her gaze locked on him and the monk quickly looked away—“stables? He probably managed to survive by hiding in the tunnels that are built under all monastery stables, and he does smell of horse and sheep shit. So he’s not an elder. Nor

is he important enough or powerful enough to work in the library. But he was still able to toss us across this field like kittens.” She nodded. “We need to get back to the monastery and find out if the artifacts are still there.”

“And if they are?” the monk asked.

“They’re yours,” Keeley said, also standing now. “We’re not going to take what belongs to your monastery, Brother. We’re just trying to help.”

He nodded and began walking back toward his monastery and the others. The sisters followed and Quinn brought up the rear. As they walked, he noticed the sisters begin to jostle each other. Then the slapping began. When they took hold of each other, he leaned down and reminded them, “Don’t think for a moment that I won’t drag both of you back there, by your ankles, in front of your entire army. Because if you’re wondering . . . yes, I *am* that big a dick.”

“We are aware,” Gemma muttered.

“Great!” he cheered, slapping them both on the backs. “I was worried you didn’t know what my father truly loves about me!”

CHAPTER 2

The bodies were buried while the suns were still in the sky, but the monk was not there. He was inside the monastery with Keeley, whom he seemed to trust, and Gemma, whom he didn't trust at all.

While they watched, he went to every space within the walls that had, at one time, held the order's artifacts. None of them remained. Not one.

Unable to bear the weight of such loss, he sat down on the first bench he came to in the kitchens and didn't move. Gemma didn't sit beside him. She knew he wouldn't like that. So Keeley did.

"I'm so sorry, Brother," she said in that way she had. The way that told you she meant it more than anyone else in the world could ever mean it. Because she did. She felt others' pain in a way no one else did.

"I have nothing."

"There are other pacifist monks you can go to in the Chessly Hills," Gemma reminded him. "I'm sure they will take you in."

"Or you can come with us," Keeley offered.

"What?" Gemma asked, trying not to sound as annoyed as she felt.

Keeley glared at her sister. "We can't just send him off to people he doesn't know."

"He doesn't know us."

"He knows us now."

"He hates me."

“He doesn’t hate anyone.”

“How do you know?”

“I know!”

“Can I speak to you in private for a moment?”

“No.” She smiled at the monk. “Please. You can stay with us until you decide what you want to do and where you want to go. It will also give my sister more time to look into what happened to your order’s artifacts.”

“They’ve probably been destroyed.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Gemma knew she should have waited to say that to Keeley in private. Especially when both of them looked up at her in horror, the monk’s eyes filling with tears and her sister’s eyes filling with rage.

“Excuse us a moment, Brother,” Keeley said before standing, grabbing Gemma’s arm, and yanking her from the kitchens.

“What is *wrong* with you? Do you need some ale?”

Gemma yanked her arm away. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Isn’t it time for you to meet Keran at the pub? Are you angry because we’re holding you back from a good drinking session? Is that why you said something so ridiculously cruel to that poor man?”

“I do *not* need a drink,” she bit out.

“Since when?”

“Since ever! I am not a drinker!”

“Oh . . . Gemma.”

Gemma scrubbed her hands across her face. She decided not to have this discussion with her sister in a monastery. She simply wouldn’t.

“Can we just go?”

“So you can drink?”

“No.” She barely stopped herself from slapping her sister . . . again. “Because there is much we need to discuss.”

“Fine. But he’s coming with us.”

“I don’t care. But you’ll need to find a place where he can greet the suns every morning.”

“And where you won’t terrify him every day?”

Gemma shrugged. “Yes.”

* * *

By the time they'd returned to what the locals liked to call "Forgetown," the horses and equipment had been unloaded, hunger and thirst sated, and the majority of blood and gore removed, it was late into the night. The small core of Keeley's "advisors," as she liked to call them, found themselves at the hall table discussing the sobbing monk and his dead brothers.

"I don't understand what the problem is," Laila admitted after Gemma gave a very short and not very helpful explanation about the monastery's artifacts. "Thieves stole their artifacts. Perhaps they stole them on order."

"Why would anyone do that?" Gemma flatly asked.

"I don't know. Why would anyone keep the bottom jaw of a dead man?" Laila asked, referring to one of the artifacts the monk had described.

"A dead monk."

"You say that as if it's supposed to mean something to me."

"There's power in religious artifacts."

"Including a jawbone?"

"Yes."

Quinn rested his elbow on the table and his chin on his raised fist before asking Gemma, "What artifacts does your order have?"

"None of your business."

"Jawbones?"

"We believe in the power of steel. Not in the power of a dead man's teeth."

"Oooh," Quinn teased, "such a tone about other religious orders. Such a snob."

"Shut up, Amichai."

"Don't get snippy with him because you haven't had your nightly drink yet," Keeley snarled.

Gemma slammed her fists on the table, and the power of the blow vibrated up through Quinn's elbows, up his arms, through his fingers, and into his head. It was one of the most intense things he'd felt in ages. There was so much strength behind the motion.

"I am *not* drinking!"

Laila and Caid simply blew out breaths but Keeley rolled her eyes in disbelief.

“Oh, come on!” the queen cried out. “No one believes that for a moment! You’re at the pub every night with Keran!”

“I go there to think.”

“At the pub?”

“I like the noise.”

“And the drink.”

“I get a pint. I nurse it.”

“Then why have you been acting so strangely?”

“I have a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?”

“Everything!”

“Think you can be more specific?”

“Can we get back to the artifacts?” Laila cut in before the sisters began rolling around on the ground again. “I really just need to go to bed and I am not in the mood to figure out if Gemma’s in denial about her drinking problem.”

“I do not have a drink—” Gemma cut herself off, shook her head. “I’m not doing this with you lot. I’m not.” She took in a breath. Let it out. “Every religious order has artifacts of its own. They all have their own power. Some more than others. Some can barely heal a spider bite. Others can destroy the countryside between here and the Baleful Forests.”

“What could the pacifist monks’ artifacts do?”

“I don’t know. They’ve never been very friendly with the orders of the war monks.”

“How shocking,” Keeley said with great sarcasm. “Considering how that brother ran from you screaming.”

Gemma raised her forefinger toward her sister. Telling her with that one finger to stop talking.

That’s when Quinn chuckled a little.

Fed up with everyone, it seemed, Gemma turned her glare on him.

“What’s so funny?” she practically snarled.

“Well . . . it’s not funny as in funny. But funny as in terrifying.”

“What’s that?” Laila asked.

“The thought of Beatrix getting her hands on something that powerful.”

He'd spoken without much thought but it was as if he was in his horse form and had lifted his tail and dropped a load of shit into the middle of the dining table.

Laila leaned forward, her gaze locking on Gemma. "Beatrix . . . She wouldn't toy with the gods like that, would she? Going after their people?"

Gemma and Keeley, no longer bothering to be angry at each other, exchanged glances.

"Well," Gemma began, "Beatrix was never one for religion."

"What does that mean?" Caid asked.

Keeley shrugged. "She never involved herself in the harvest rituals or the festivals."

"Does she believe in the gods?" Quinn asked.

"She believes," Keeley said.

"But," Gemma quickly added, "she doesn't really worship any god."

"At all?"

"Not really."

"She went through a research phase," Keeley explained. "Read lots of books on many gods, but when she was about fourteen, I think, she finally said she didn't find any that she agreed with. Or liked, for that matter, and she wasn't about to cut a bull's throat because all that blood was just messy."

"Do you have to sacrifice a bull to all your human gods?"

Gemma shook her head, clearly annoyed. "No. That was such a horseshit answer."

"So this attack could have been Beatrix."

"This could have been something Beatrix *ordered*," Gemma clarified. "But why that particular religious sect . . . ? It's not like they're well known for their power."

Quinn shrugged and again, without much thought, simply suggested, "Maybe there are others."

"Maybe what?"

"Other sects. Other orders. That she wants artifacts from."

And again, it was that "he'd-just-shat-on-the-dinner-table" look.

Gemma focused on the table for several long seconds before she said to her sister, "I'll get a list together."

“I’ll get the horses. You three meet us out front in five minutes.”

Laila let them get about ten feet from the table before she called out, “Oy. What are you two royal idiots doing?”

When it was just the five of them alone, she never bothered with the niceties of court. Not anymore. These days they often didn’t have the time.

“We’re going to—”

“You two aren’t going to do anything,” Laila said. “Do you know why?”

“Because we’re tired after a day of butchery?” Keeley asked.

“No, my luv. Because you’re queen. And you,” she said, pointing at Gemma, her eyes rolling before her sister could even finish, “are the princess and a very valuable general. The two of you need to be”—and both Quinn and Caid leaned away because they knew what was coming—“*here!*” she bellowed, most likely waking up the entire household.

And with that, she stood. The chair she’d been sitting in flew back and hit the floor hard.

“We continue to go through this every few weeks! You two think you can just saunter in and out of the queendom that you *rule!* Do you see my mum roaming around here? Hanging out with the children she adores? No! Do you know why? Because this is not where she rules! She stays with her people! So, no, my dearest human friends! You can’t go traipsing off in the middle of the night to check on some random list of religious orders to see if your sister has attacked them too! Because your work is *here!* Is there a chance, possibly, that you—*finally!*—understand what I am *telling you?*”

The two royals looked at each other and, slowly, made their way back to the table.

After a moment, Gemma said to Keeley, “I need your five fastest riders.”

Keeley nodded. “Done.” She walked out and Gemma exited in the opposite direction.

“Feel better?” Caid asked their sister.

“I don’t know why I have to keep saying it.”

“Because they weren’t born to be royals like you. Keeley thought

she'd spend her entire life making warriors' armor and on slow days her neighbors' cookware."

"It's been two years."

"Have you known anyone more a blacksmith than Keeley Smythe?"

With a long sigh, Laila's head dropped and Quinn picked up her chair so she could sit down.

A few minutes later, the sisters returned, Keeley with five soldiers who had not gone with them into battle that day. Three women and two males, thinner than the brutes who charged head-first into combat. Quinn guessed these five were messengers. The ones who brought messages back and forth from the front to the commanders in other parts of the battle. They wore the scars of survivors, so none of them were dilettantes.

Gemma gave them scrolls and directions and off the five went.

"Where are they going?" Caid asked once it was just their small group again.

"There are five different sects within a half day's riding distance from here. Two monasteries, a church, a convent, and a coven. We'll see if any of them have heard anything or have had any problems. I've also offered them the protection of the crown."

"Oh, that was nice," Keeley said, smiling.

And Quinn realized that Keeley wasn't speaking with sarcasm or malice. She truly meant it. Usually only the queen herself could offer such a thing, but Keeley wasn't one to stand on ceremony.

"And until the riders get back?"

Gemma shrugged at Laila's question. "Get some rest?"

"While you get a drink?" Keeley asked. And there was that sarcasm!

Mouth dropping open, Gemma gawked at her sister a moment before storming off.

"Pub's that way," Keeley said, pointing toward the front doors.

They heard Gemma growl before she disappeared up the stairs to the bedrooms on the other floors added on to the rambling building by the sisters' insane but brilliant uncle.

Quinn and his siblings stared at the human queen until Quinn finally asked her, "Now you're just ruthlessly fucking with her, aren't you?"

She snorted a laugh before bending over at the waist. “I am!” she squealed in between laughs.

“What is wrong with you two?” Laila demanded in disgust before walking away. “Both of you . . . just so strange!”

“Don’t listen to her,” Quinn assured Keeley. “Because I’m having the time of my life.”