

Fantasy Flames 1: Cavern Dancer

Kate Hill

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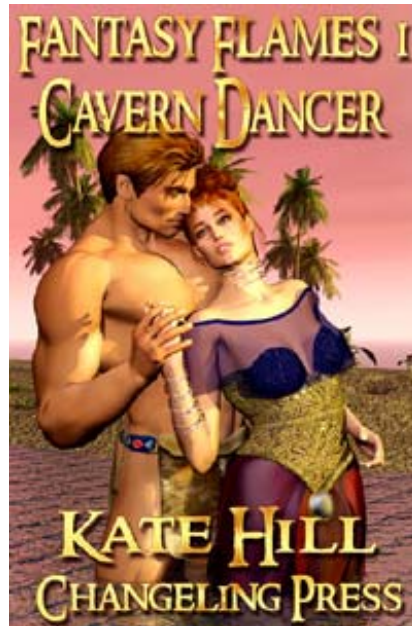
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Chapter One

"I suppose you're wondering why I've sent for you?" King Tabor of Julius fixed his squinty gaze on his bejeweled hand rather than on his half brother, Jehf, who knelt directly in front of him.

"I admit I am curious."

"How is your injury?" asked the king, the disinterest in his voice at war with his question.

Jehf's insides twisted with anger. Drafted into the war between Julius and the neighboring kingdom of Sun Isle, he had been taken prisoner, sustaining a severe leg injury that had nearly cost him his life and his ability to dive. "It's almost healed."

"Good. Very good. I imagine such an injury caused your love life to suffer."

The question took Jehf aback. He stared at his brother, who finally met his gaze. "Excuse me, Your Majesty?"

"It couldn't have been easy pleasuring women while you were in such condition."

"What does this have to do with --"

"Are you healed enough now to perform?"

"Perform?"

"Come, come, Jehf. A strapping male such as yourself mustn't be shy about such things. And, after all, this conversation is between brothers."

Jehf's curiosity suddenly turned to suspicion. Tabor hated recognizing his peasant relations. Other than the king's rare public appearances, Jehf hadn't seen his brother since they were children. Even then Tabor had hated their physical resemblance to one another, one of the reasons Tabor had ordered Jehf, unlike the rest of the old king's illegitimate children, banished from the palace.

Not that Jehf minded. He preferred the life of his mother's people, Cavern Dancers who had settled on Julius's southern coast. From his mother's race he'd inherited the "water magic." Although the Cavern Dancers were little more than slaves to Julius's Royal House, their aquatic gifts were revered by many. Cavern Dancers were able to hold their breath for up to an hour, diving to depths which would kill ordinary humans.

The Cavern Dancers were used to dive for the world's most precious jewels, Hell's Eyes. One of the world's biggest supplies of Hell's Eyes was located in the deepest, darkest ocean caverns just off the coast of Julius. The Cavern Dancers underwater mining supported Tabor's kingdom well, even if the divers saw little of the rewards from their work.

"I need to know if you are fit to sleep with a woman, Jehf."

Jehf flinched. "Why?"

"You have served your country well, but I have one last duty for you to perform for the sake of Julius."

He didn't like the sound of this. "In what way?"

"As you know, next month I am to marry the princess of Minor Ives."

"Yes."

"I have no desire to consummate the marriage, but it is necessary that I secure an heir."

Tabor's reply didn't surprise Jehf. Though no one dared speak of it openly, it was rumored that the king preferred men in his bed. "With all due respect, what does that have to do with me?"

"You and I are so similar in appearance that we could be twins." Though Tabor offered a frozen smile, his distaste shone in his eyes. "I will marry Princess Gilana, but you will spend the wedding night with her, and every night thereafter until she conceives."

If the plan hadn't disgusted Jehf, he might have laughed in his brother's face, king or no. "I refuse."

"To refuse me is to risk imprisonment."

"Then have your guards take me away."

An evil smile spread across Tabor's face. "I had a feeling you would say that. You're brave to the point of being stupid. I also know your savings from diving for merchants in addition to diving for Julius itself have been depleted. Your mother is ill and the medical care she requires is expensive."

Jehf's teeth ground. It seemed Tabor had been keeping close watch on him. With each passing moment, Jehf hated his brother more.

"Do what I command, and I will see that your mother is given the care she requires directly from the royal healers. If you refuse, you will be jailed. And then who will look after your mother and young sister?"

"You're a damn tyrant."

"If I didn't need your flesh all in one piece, I'd have you whipped for that comment. What is your answer?"

"All right." The words left a bitter taste in Jehf's mouth.

Tabor smiled. "Don't look so upset. After all, your child will inherit the Crown of Julius, something that you never could have hoped for."

"Something that never mattered to me."

"My servants will arrange your training."

"Training?"

"Though you are to avoid conversation with the princess, we must make sure you will pass for a king, should you be forced to speak with her. Of course no one must ever know about this, including your family."

Of course. Jehf nodded.

Glancing away, the king waved his hand. "Leave me now. My guards will take you to your chamber. From now until your task is complete, you will live at the palace."

"But my family --"

"Will be informed that you are serving your king. Remember, as long as you cooperate, your mother will be cared for. Should you cause any problems, you and your

family will be executed. Do you understand?"

Jehf gritted his teeth and nodded. Two guards approached. One prodded him with the flat of his sword and guided him out of Tabor's chamber.

* * *

Princess Gilana, dressed in her wedding finery, walked through the public garden in the center of Julius's capital city. Hundreds of guests gathered around, anxious to witness her marriage to King Tabor. It seemed they were far more excited about it than she was. Still, part of her duty was to ensure prosperity for her kingdom. Marriage to a man as powerful as Tabor would do just that. Not that her land of Minor Ives wasn't a force to be reckoned with, but once she inherited the throne, Minor Ives and Julius would unite. Under the joint rule of her and her husband, their lands would become one of the largest, strongest forces in the world.

Gazing toward the fountain of the chief god and goddess where Tabor stood with the priest, she wished she felt differently about the king. It would have been nice to at least *like* her husband. She knew better than to ask for love. Love was reserved for those without political responsibilities.

Tall and slim, with thick chestnut hair, Tabor was considered attractive by most women. Gilana found him a bit too arrogant and his gestures almost effeminate. Not that effeminate men offended her; she simply didn't relish the idea of marrying one.

When she reached the fountain, the priest smiled slightly in greeting while Tabor examined the delicate lace decorating his shirtsleeve. He squinted badly, making his rather small, close-set eyes appear unattractive. If not for his eyes, he might have been handsome.

Gilana was thankful that wedding ceremonies in Julius were short.

The crowd fell silent when the priest held up a small silver bowl and began speaking. "On this day, Tabor Bradley Garrad and Gilana Francine Kees will join for life. Under the protection of the all-seeing god and goddess, they will love one another. Honesty and respect will prevail over any temptation which may threaten their happiness."

Gilana tried to catch Tabor's gaze, but he was staring blankly across the garden, so she turned her full attention to the priest.

"To purify themselves and begin a fresh life together, they will drink from the sacred fountain."

The priest offered the bowl to Tabor who filled it and drank. As ritual demanded, he then held the bowl to her lips.

As she sipped, she glanced at him again, thinking how beautiful the ceremony could have been, had they actually shared the love the priest had spoken of.

The priest took back the bowl and said, "Do you, Gilana accept Tabor as your husband, to love as purely as the goddess loves the god?"

"I do."

"Do you, Tabor, accept Gilana as your wife, to love as purely as the god loves the goddess?"

Tabor covered his lips with a delicate hand to stifle his yawn before he replied, "I do."

"You are now wed."

Gilana tried to smile at smiled her new husband as she stepped forward, expecting the traditional wedding kiss. Turning abruptly, Tabor, followed by two of his guards, exited down the pathway leading out of the garden.

Drawing a deep breath, Gilana glanced around, noticing that many of the guests looked as surprised as she felt. His insult enraged her. One of Gilana's flaws was her horrible temper. In her youth, her instructors had tried to curb it, but when something angered her, Gilana's wrath was almost uncontrollable.

If Tabor thought he could snub her like this, she would make him pay. She wouldn't say a word to him at the wedding banquet.

* * *

An hour later, Gilana's anger had reached a dangerous peak. Her plan to ignore Tabor throughout the meal failed because he didn't so much as glance at her. The man looked thoroughly bored with the entire feast, especially with his bride.

Finally he stood and turned to one of his guards. "I've had enough of this. I require time alone."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Tabor turned to Gilana. "I will see you in your chamber in half an hour."

"You think so, Your Majesty?" she said through clenched teeth. "After you ignore me you believe I will crawl obediently into your bed?"

He curled his lip, then leaned close to her ear and whispered, "Yes, unless you want this marriage declared null and void."

Gilana's teeth ground. She longed to fling her goblet of wine in his face, but she couldn't. Her mother and her kingdom expected this marriage to succeed.

"Well?" Tabor stood, squinting down at her.

"In half an hour."

He turned on his heel and swept out of the hall, followed by his guards.

* * *

"Are you sure you'll be all right, my lady?" asked Gilana's servant, Rozamond. She glanced at the princess with concern as she smoothed the satin sheets concealing Gilana's naked curves.

"Fine. From what I know of King Tabor, this won't take very long."

Rozamond stifled a giggle.

"It's not funny, Rozamond. He is the last man I wish to bed."

"He is handsome."

Gilana shrugged. "He looks like he might be scrawny under all those fancy clothes. The way he constantly yawns in my presence is most offensive."

"He's a king and doesn't need to concern himself with the feelings of others."

"Even his queen?"

"Think of it this way, my lady, once an heir is secured, he probably won't bother you anymore. You'll have wealth, power, and the freedom to take as many lovers as you want. With discretion, of course. Otherwise your life as well as the lives of everyone in Minor Ives will be at his mercy."

Gilana nearly shivered, for she was certain that Tabor didn't know the meaning of mercy. Not only that, the thought of taking lovers depressed Gilana even more. What if she fell in love with one of them? They would spend their lives engaged in secret meetings, always wondering if king and countries would discover their treason. Then, her lover would tire of such intrigue and find another woman to marry.

Sometimes Gilana wished she could simply abandon her life and become someone else. As the only child of the queen of Minor Ives, she was duty bound to succeed her mother. If she didn't, next in line for the throne was her cousin, Vanessa, a greedy bitch who enjoyed tormenting anything weaker than herself. Gilana could only imagine how the people of Minor Ives would suffer under the rule of such a woman.

At least once she inherited the throne, Gilana would have joint power with Tabor. Under the marriage contract, they would have equal control over their lands. If one was accused of committing adultery, the other would become the sole ruler of both lands. If no heir was secured, Tabor would also inherit both lands, unless it was somehow proved that he could not give the queen children. An archaic clause, it was one Julius refused to negotiate.

"I'd best leave you now, my lady." Rozamond walked to the door, then turned and glanced over her shoulder. "You look lovely. Maybe he'll realize what a lucky man he is."

Gilana's lips twisted into a wry smile before the servant left her alone to await the king.

* * *

Jehf's heart pounded with rage as he strode between four guards on his way to Queen Gilana's chamber. Every fiber of his being rebelled against what he was about to do. He even detested the clothes he'd been dressed in. A crown of gold and jewels rested heavily on his head. The embroidered shirt felt hot and constricting to a man accustomed to spending his days swimming half naked.

After being cooped up in the palace's uppermost tower for the past month, he longed for the sea. Day and night scholars taught him how to walk, eat, drink, and

speak like a royal. He was briefed on political issues, especially between Julius and Minor Ives, and had learned everything about Gilana's home and family.

By now, he could probably become the king himself. Many nights he imagined strangling his hated brother and assuming the throne. Still, Jehf could never do it. In spite of his hatred, he was no killer. Memories of the men he had killed during the war were horrible enough. He had no wish to add another death to the list.

The only thing that bothered him more than his captivity was concern for his mother and sister. For the past month, he had no contact with them. He prayed that Tabor was keeping up his end of the bargain.

The guards paused outside a door at the end of the corridor. "Enter here. Guards will be posted all night. Just before dawn, you will be escorted back to your room."

More like his prison.

Jehf considered attempting an escape. He could take the four guards, but even if he did, he would never make it out of the palace alive, and his family would be killed.

Clenching his teeth, he knocked sharply on the door.

"Come in."

His brow furrowed. That voice had an angry edge to it. He stepped into the dark chamber, closed the door, and ducked just in time to avoid being struck by a vase.

"Are you mad?" Jehf snapped at the woman kneeling atop the bed. Torn between anger and the strongest physical attraction he had ever experienced, he stared at her with what was surely a dumb expression.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. It just slipped out of my fingers."

She didn't sound or look the least bit sorry. Her large blue eyes glistened with a malice completely unbecoming her lovely face. The silk sheet wrapped around her middle scarcely concealed her firm, round breasts, the nipples poking enticingly against the fabric. Perhaps bedding her wouldn't be as bad as he thought.

Warily, he approached the bed.

"So you plan to ignore me now just as you did during the ceremony and the feast."

"Ignore?"

"As if you don't recall how you snubbed me. While this is not a marriage of love, I do expect a certain level of respect. If you cannot --"

"I assure you, I in no way intended to snub you. If I was silent earlier, it was only because I was dumbstruck by your beauty."

She stared at him, her expression one of combined surprise and disbelief. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you will, but the truth is I have no desire to offend you, only to make you as happy as I know how during our time together." At least that much was true. Though he had no idea what his brother had done to offend her, it was now up to him to make up for it. Not only that, he could scarcely wait to fulfill his end of the bargain. Everything about her, from the floral scent of her perfume to the way her eyes flashed at him, stirred his desire as he never imagined possible.

For a long moment they gazed at one another. He longed to bury his fingers in her thick, black hair and find out if it was as soft as it looked. More than anything he wanted to kiss her delicate pink lips and caress the creamy flesh of her shoulders and arms. He could scarcely wait for her to cast aside the sheet and reveal the beauty of her naked form.

Gilana's brow furrowed and she relaxed backward onto the pillows. "There's something different about you, Your Majesty."

Though Tabor had said he had only met with his wife-to-be on two occasions, this woman was obviously perceptive enough to suspect their deception.

"Something through the eyes," she said.

He forced a smile. "Perhaps it's some trick of the light?"

Nodding slowly, she stared at him for several heartbeats. "We should get on with this."

Jehf resisted the urge to rip off his clothes and devour her. He must act like a king, not a peasant stealing kisses under a bale of hay. One of the things the scholars had taught him was that royalty never revealed their emotions, even in the most private

moments. He was to talk as little as possible, take his pleasure, and fall asleep until the guards summoned him. The task had seemed so simple earlier. Distasteful, but simple.

Now that he had met Gilana, he realized it was practically impossible. Already he longed to know more about her. The sound of her voice and the way her gaze held his when she spoke intrigued him. The idea of sharing a bed with this woman and not developing feelings for her was absurd.

The only possible way would be if she conceived in one or two nights. Then he might be saved from the emotions already growing inside him. On the morrow, the king's soothsayer would meet with her and reveal whether or not she was with child. The soothsayer was from a magical race, many of whom possessed the power of divination.

No matter what Jehf might hope, the damage had already been done.

He crossed the room, unfastening the ties on his cloak. Even if he never saw Gilana again after tonight, she was imprinted on his mind. Somehow he knew that no matter what twists and turns his life might take, when he finally drew his dying breath, her name would be on his lips and her face in his thoughts.

Chapter Two

Gilana's heart pounded and her head spun with confusion. Her gaze fixed on the king who had turned his back to her and began undressing. She could scarcely believe that this was the same man who had treated her with such contempt all evening. Not only was he speaking to her with gentleness and respect, but he even looked different. Perhaps it had to do with the lighting after all, but he was no longer squinting and she was able to discern the full beauty of his eyes. They weren't nearly as close set as she had thought, if fact, they were set rather wide and they glistened with warmth she had never noticed before.

As he peeled away the layers of embroidered clothes, her curiosity turned to scarcely controllable lust. She never would have imagined that Tabor possessed such a gorgeous body. Lean with muscles developed to perfection, he was the most breathtaking man she had ever seen. His prominent buttocks were tighter and smoother than any she had ever dreamed about. When he finally turned to her, she nearly lost her breath. His broad chest and muscle-ridged stomach were hairless, reminding her of the Cavern Dancers she had seen during a carriage ride along the coast when she'd been a child. Like them, he exuded raw power, but also animalistic grace. If she hadn't know better, she would have thought her husband belonged to that powerful race, untouched by pampered court life.

Gilana's gaze drifted lower and fixed on his cock. The thick, well-veined rod seemed to salute her, the balls below it heavy and well formed.

The king approached the bed and paused beside her, so close that all she had to do was reach out and she could curl her fist around his fascinating cock. His penetrating gaze held her captive.

"I would like to see the rest of you, Gilana."

Her heart pounding, she thrust aside the sheet and lay naked in front of him. What would he think of her? Would she arouse him as much as he aroused her?

By the expression in his eyes and the way his already sizeable cock swelled to even larger proportions, he liked what he saw.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured, sitting on the bed beside her and sweeping the tips of his fingers between her breasts and down her belly. He stared at her thatch of pubic hair as if it was something rare and exotic. With the utmost tenderness, he stroked her hair and caressed her pink clit peeking through it.

Gilana loved the sensation of his fingers and hand upon her. In spite of the gentleness of his touch, the roughness of his skin surprised her. Tabor's hand had appeared so smooth earlier, yet the hands touching her now bore calluses. Perhaps it was from fencing practice. Many royals took a keen interest in swordsmanship.

Unable to contain herself any longer, she brushed her hand over his pelvis which was as smooth and hairless as the rest of him. The only hair he had was the thick chestnut locks on his head. Her fingers danced along his shaft before she wrapped her fist around it and stroked the velvety flesh.

The king's eyes half closed and he drew a deep breath. His cock pulsed in her hand and she suddenly longed to feel it buried deep inside her.

Cupping her soft mound, he used his whole hand to rub and stroke her. Little tremors of delight coursed through her and she arched against his palm. While she fondled his cock, he caressed her clit and circled her pussy with one finger. The digit slipped inside her wet passage, gathering moisture that he used to stroke her clit.

Aching for him, Gilana gasped and wiggled her hips in time with his stroking hand.

"Please," she panted. "Please, Your Majesty. I want you to fill me."

"Gilana, my beauty. I want the same, but not so fast. We have the whole night to explore each other. I want it to last."

"So do I, but can't we do it fast once, then savor the rest of the night?"

A slight smile touched his chiseled lips. "You're as hungry as I am. Maybe it

would be better to sate our passion quickly, then engage in gentler games.”

Gilana had never imagined wanting Tabor this much. She felt ready to explode from desire. His scent, his touch, everything about him sent her heart racing out of control and made her libido sing.

Stretching out beside her on the bed, he covered her breasts with gentle kisses, then took one of her nipples between his lips. At the first swipe of his tongue over the stiff bud, Gilana cried out and clutched his head closer. She threaded her fingers through his hair and moaned with pleasure as he licked, nibbled, and sucked the sensitive bud. Each swipe of his tongue seemed to tease her clit and pussy as well. He caressed her thigh, then slipped two fingers inside her while using his thumb to circle her clit. All the while, his lips, tongue, and teeth continued playing with her nipple.

Gilana’s heart pounded and she closed her eyes tightly. Assaulted by sensation, she could do nothing more than squirm beneath him while her body tensed with pleasure. If he didn’t stop, she was going to climax right then.

She whimpered in protest as his mouth left her breast and his hand slid away from her clit. Slipping down her body, he lifted her legs over his shoulders. His hands clasped her hips and dragged her closer to his face.

Oh, heavens, he was going to --

The first sweep of his tongue over her clit might have driven her off the bed if Tabor had not held her steady, controlling her frantic writhing. He lapped slowly, as if savoring her, while his strong hands slid from her hips to her buttocks and squeezed.

Never in her life had Gilana experienced such marvelous sensations. She felt completely raw and exposed. Her clit seemed to throb in time with her frantic heartbeat. Tabor began using his lips and teeth ever so gently on her clit, then began a steady rhythm of upward strokes with his tongue that flung her headlong into orgasm.

“Oh, yes! Oh!” she wailed, her head tossing on the pillow, every muscle in her body straining.

His relentless lapping continued, prolonging her climax and swiftly driving her toward another. Gilana’s body arched. Her skin was aflame and her heart pounded so

hard that she was certain she would faint. Whoever would have imagined that Tabor would be a perfect lover?

Another orgasm, even more intense than the first, shook her from head to toe. Threading her fingers through his hair, she thrust her hips against him, knowing that within a few seconds his warm, wet mouth would leave her. To her surprise, he continued sucking and licking. The man must have a steel jaw and the ability to hold his breath like a bloody Cavern Dancer!

Two orgasms later, Gilana lay panting and drained. Or so she thought.

His body suddenly covered hers and miraculously, the feeling of his hard, smooth chest against her breasts and his breath tickling her ear aroused her again. Bracing a forearm on either side of her head, he kissed her. The tip of his cock slowly circled her pussy, then slid in ever so gently.

Gilana clung to him, panting as his erection filled her, inch by magnificent inch. For several moments they lay, locked in each other's arms, joined as closely as two people could be.

He began thrusting in a rhythm that drove her wild, pulling out almost to the tip, then sweeping back inside her.

"Oh! Tabor, yes! Oh, my lord! I've never felt anything like this."

"Neither have I," he panted close to her ear. His movements increased, driving her faster and harder toward perfection.

"My lord, you're going to kill me!" she cried. The man was absolutely insatiable.

Unable to endure another moment of the exquisite torture, Gilana exploded. Throughout her climax, he continued thrusting into her, drawing out her pleasure until the last marvelous ripple.

* * *

Jehf lay atop Gilana, his heart pounding and his breath coming in harsh pants. His cock, still buried deep inside her pussy, felt ready to burst. This woman tempted his self-control like no one he had ever met. He wanted to fill her with his seed. It was what he had been sent to do, yet something stopped him.

When she had cried out his brother's name just before she climaxed, a guilty feeling had washed over him. No matter what the reason, this deception was wrong. Gilana was as much a puppet in his brother's game as Jehf was himself.

By the way she had reacted when he'd entered her chamber, Jehf knew his brother must have already treated her badly. Should he do even worse by making love with her under false pretenses?

Suddenly her vaginal muscles began squeezing his cock again. She clung to him, stroking his back and shoulders while murmuring endearments in his ear.

"Gilana, don't," he panted, closing his eyes tightly. In spite of his doubts, his body reacted to her words and touch. Already on the verge of orgasm, the marvelous stroking of her wet sheath over his cock flung him into a breath-stealing climax.

"Gilana. Gilana," he gasped, his hips thrusting and body straining as he came long and hard.

Rolling off her, he teetered on the border between heaven and hell. Heaven for the sheer bliss her body inspired and hell because of the lie he had taken part in.

The queen snuggled closer to him and rested her cheek against his chest. One of her smooth legs draped over his body.

"I never imagined it could be like this for us, Tabor."

"Neither did I."

Chapter Three

The following morning, Gilana awoke with a smile. She reached for Tabor, but the bed beside her was empty. Gazing at the sunlight bleeding through the curtains of the narrow window, she thought about the wonderful night she had spent with her husband. The emotional connection they shared surprised her. She had expected a loveless marriage. Now she realized that she and Tabor might have a happy life together.

What puzzled her was Tabor's attitude toward her during their previous meetings and at the wedding ceremony. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was two completely different men.

Dozens of reasons for his strange behavior rushed through her mind. Perhaps he thought keeping an aloof public image was best for a king. As much as Gilana loathed false behavior, she sometimes found herself using a public face that differed from her private one.

Two taps on the door roused her from her thoughts. Rozamond stepped inside carrying fresh water and a towel.

"Good morning."

"It's a wonderful morning." Gilana slipped out of bed and into her robe.

Rozamond smiled. "You seem to be in a cheerful mood."

"Why shouldn't I be? I had the most wonderful night of my life."

The maid couldn't hide her surprise. "Glad to hear it, my lady."

"Do you know where the king is this morning?" Gilana could scarcely wait to see him again. The thought of talking with him and gazing into his eyes made her tingle from head to toe. More than anything, she longed for evening to come so that they could be alone again.

"No, but I was told to give you this message from him. He has business to attend, but will meet with you tonight."

Disappointment smothered her excitement. "Oh, I see."

"You'll be busy today, as well, my lady."

Rozamond was correct. She would be occupied with learning more about the people and customs of Julius.

While Gilana washed, Rozamond prepared her clothes. No sooner had the queen finished dressing than someone knocked on her door.

"That will be the soothsayer," Rozamond said. "We were told he would be coming."

Gilana's heart fluttered. Suddenly the thought of carrying Tabor's child seemed more exiting than she had ever imagined.

The maid opened the door. "Good morn --"

Before she finished speaking, a tall man draped in a white hooded robe brushed past her, his gaze fixed on Gilana. At first glance, his eyes appeared black, but a closer look revealed their true emerald green. Demon's eyes. Never a woman to be easily intimidated, the queen met his stare, though inside she quivered.

He paused a foot from her and she instinctively stepped back. The soothsayer followed, stalking her like some hellish predator until her back touched the wall. Worst of all, he didn't say a word, only stared as if he could coax her soul out of her body by his look alone.

Finally, he turned and headed for the door.

"Wait," Gilana said, her voice commanding in spite of the apprehension she felt. He stopped, but didn't turn to her. "Am I carrying the king's child?"

"No." His deep voice filled the room. "You are not."

Rozamond flung open the door and stepped aside quickly, as if fearful of standing too close to the soothsayer. Once he left, she closed the door and leaned against it, a visible shudder rippling through her.

"Just like a wraith, that one. I don't know how you managed to look into his

eyes."

"He might be a soothsayer, but he's still just a man," Gilana said with more conviction than she felt. There was something otherworldly about her dark-eyed guest and she disliked the idea of having him pay her a visit each morning. Still, it was part of the marriage contract, so she could endure his brief visits until he gave her the answer that would bind her to Tabor completely and forever.

"His race are beyond men."

"Yet he serves a human king. Perhaps his kind are not as all-powerful as the legends claim. Come, Rozamond." Gilana smoothed her dress and headed for the door. "No point in wasting the day."

The more activities she engaged in, the quicker the hours would seem to pass before she was finally with Tabor again.

* * *

Jehf sat on the stone floor of his cell and stared at the candle flame flickering against the wall. The book on his lap had been open to the same page for the past hour. Since his captivity, the most interesting way to pass the time was with the books brought by the scholars who had prepared him for his interaction with the queen. Now all he could think about was Gilana.

He hated lying to her. If he wasn't so attracted to her, then he could tell himself the entire situation was against his will. Already he could hardly wait for the night to come so he could make love with her again.

The thought of running his hands over her soft flesh and kissing her luscious breasts stirred his cock and quickened his breathing. Placing the book aside, he stood and paced the cell. If only he could swim for a few hours he might get his mind off her for a short time, at least. He longed for exercise. To a Cavern Dancer, a month away from the water was like keeping a horse locked in a stable. He feared his physical conditioning would suffer due to lack of practice.

What was he thinking? The only way he would gain his freedom would be by getting Gilana with child. Once that happened, he would probably never see her again,

except for glimpses of her outside the palace. Tabor would be by her side with a child who rightfully belonged to Jehf.

His fists clenched. How could he stand the thought of surrendering a child he and Gilana created to a brother he despised?

"There must be some way out of this," Jehf muttered. His earlier idea of killing Tabor and assuming the throne appealed to him more than ever. If the king's wife couldn't see the difference between them, then surely fooling other people wouldn't be difficult.

No. Such a plan was out of the question. He never saw Tabor, and even if he did manage another audience with his brother, guards were sure to be present. Though most of the kingdom despised Tabor, his personal guards remained faithful to him.

Jehf paused, touching his forehead to the cold stone wall. Already he was obsessed with Gilana. He wanted to know everything about her and spend each waking moment with her. If he was forced to continue seeing her for any length of time, he didn't doubt that he would fall hopelessly in love.

Perhaps not.

The previous night, he had done as ordered and hadn't conversed with her but spent their time making love. If he talked to her, he would probably find that she was as arrogant and shallow as Tabor himself.

That was his plan. Talk to her. Find out what she was really like, but only after sating the passion that threatened to burn him to ashes.

* * *

Several hours later, Jehf walked between four guards on his way to Gilana's chamber. His heart beat faster at the thought of seeing her again. Every kiss, caress, and whispered endearment of the night before was imprinted on his mind. His hands ached to touch her and he could almost feel her lips against his.

Pausing outside her door, he tapped once and her sweet voice called for him to enter.

He stepped into the dim chamber and closed the door behind him. Gilana stood

by the window, her robe parted, revealing a hint of her naked curves. She stepped closer to him, lust gleaming in her enormous blue eyes.

"I thought tonight would never come," she said, slipping her arms around him and kissing him.

Jehf responded with all the ardor he felt. His entire body awakened, stirred by her scent, her touch, and the sound of her voice.

"As did I," he admitted, holding her tightly. He kissed her cheek and neck while slipping her robe down her shoulders. The golden silk pooled at her feet.

Any thoughts of conversation drifted from his mind as he swept her into his arms and kissed her again. He placed her on the bed, but when he stood to remove his clothes, she grasped the front of his shirt.

"Lie back and let me," she said in a husky voice.

A slight smile touched his lips as he did what she asked and stretched out on his back.

Gilana straddled his hips and slowly unfastened the ties on his shirt. She parted the fabric and ran her hands over his chest, murmuring, "You have the most beautiful body I've ever seen."

He sat up for a moment and tugged off his shirt. Gilana slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him, pressing her soft breasts against his chest. Her fingertips danced over his ribs then stroked up and down his spine with feathery touches.

Jehf closed his eyes and buried his lips in the hollow of her shoulder. Lost in a haze of sensation, he wrapped his arms around her and held her closer, wishing the night would never end.

She slipped from his embrace and knelt between his legs. The softness of her hands sliding over his inner thighs aroused him. Gilana moistened her lips and leaned closer to his cock. His heartbeat quickened with anticipation and he began stroking her silky hair. The sudden urge to grasp her head and press her close to his erection almost overtook him, so he forced himself to relax. Resting against the headboard, he closed his eyes and drew several calming breaths. No sooner had her soft, moist lips closed over

his cockhead than he quickly lost his grasp on conscious thought. Her tongue swirled over the crown of his erection and tickled the underside while one of her hands slid up and down his shaft. She grasped his balls and kneaded them.

Clutching handfuls of her hair, he groaned with delight as she drew him deeper into her mouth. His cockhead brushed the back of her throat and he forced himself to keep his hips from thrusting wildly.

Slowly, she withdrew his rod from her mouth and began kissing it from head to base. She ran her teeth gently along the shaft, then lashed the hard length of him with her warm, wet tongue.

Captured by lust, Jehf moaned and panted, his pulse racing. Never before had he taken such pleasure in a woman. Gilana seemed to know exactly how to touch him. She increased her rhythm, then slowed it, keeping him hovering on the brink of ultimate pleasure.

“Gilana, yes. Ah!”

As she began sucking him fast and deep, he felt torn between the desire to explode in her mouth and the need to take control of their pleasure by burying his cock in her pussy.

Just when he was about to come, her mouth left him and she clutched the base of his shaft. Gasping, his head spinning with desire, Jehf waited, feeling her breath on his cockhead. Slowly, her tongue flicked out, tasting his crown and licking away the first droplets of his elixir that waited to burst forth in a torrent of pleasure.

“Are you trying to kill me, woman?” he murmured.

She uttered a soft, sensual laugh, then covered his inner thighs with kisses. Her tongue ran over his hips, then returned to the base of his cock. Slowly, she used the tips of her fingers to stroke his shaft, then grasped it firmly and began sucking his cockhead again, this time with a vengeance.

“Oh, damn it, Gilana. Gods, woman.”

Jehf’s entire body tensed. His buttocks clenched and he could no longer stop his hips from thrusting. Gilana sucked faster, her silken lips and swirling tongue driving

him to sensual heights he never imagined possible. His attraction to her combined with the perfection of her touch flung him into the most magnificent orgasm he had ever experienced.

Lost to sensation, he called her name and threaded his fingers through her hair.

* * *

Later that night, Gilana lifted her head from Jehf's shoulder and gazed at him. Her body ached marvelously from their lovemaking, but her pleasure surpassed the physical. The more time she spent with him, the more she enjoyed his company. She longed to find out everything about her husband. What were his views about raising children? What were his likes and dislikes?

"What are your hopes for our people?"

His brow furrowed. "My hopes?"

"Yes. We know so little about each other, yet we're to spend our lives together. I want to know about you, Tabor."

"I want to know about you, too."

Grinning, she caressed his face. "I asked you first."

"What are my hopes for our people? I want them to be happy and prosperous. I wish poverty could be eliminated and I wish peace would reign forever."

His reply shocked Gilana. "Is that true?"

"Yes."

"It's an impossible goal."

"So you disagree?"

"On the contrary, I feel exactly the same way about my people. It would be wonderful if all wars would end and everyone's basic needs were met. Maybe it is something we can work on together?"

He gazed at her, his eyes glistening with emotions she didn't fully understand. "You care about all your subjects, not only ones of royal blood?"

"Minor Ives values all its citizens. I know Julius enforces class distinctions, which is why your reply surprised me. As king, you could make so many changes."

"I am king, yet my advisors also have a strong influence over the laws of Julius."

"But your power is greater than theirs."

"If it was completely up to me, many things would be different in Julius. I don't want to discuss politics now." He cupped her face in his hand and kissed her. "I would much rather find out more about you."

"Maybe you're right. We can talk about it in the morning, unless you have more business to attend tomorrow?"

"Yes. I do, but I'll see you in the evening."

"Why do you avoid me so much?"

"I'm not avoiding you. You must understand that I have appointments to keep."

Her anger rose. "I'm not sure what you expect from a wife, but I have no desire to be ignored by day and used as diversion by night. When I inherit the crown of Minor Ives, my power will be equal to yours and we must work together for --"

"I assure you, I have no desire to simply use you for diversion. All I'm suggesting is that we take some time to get to know each other on a personal level before discussing business."

Gilana drew a calming breath. Perhaps he was right. Once they understood each other, working together for the benefit of their kingdoms would be easier. "I'm sorry."

His arms tightened around her. "You need not apologize to me."

"Tabor, I want us to have a happy marriage. At first I didn't think it was possible for us to care for each other, but that was before I knew you."

Again he gazed at her with an expression she didn't quite understand. His lips brushed hers with the utmost tenderness before he turned and blew out the candle on the night table.

Wrapped in his arms, Gilana drifted to sleep.

Chapter Four

Gilana gazed into the soothsayer's eyes and her entire body tensed. Though he had never given her any reason to fear him, he terrified her. The idea that someone could sense pregnancy before the woman herself, that he could even foretell the future, was enough to unsettle anyone.

Her fear of the soothsayer annoyed her. Never a timid woman, Gilana forced herself to meet his fathomless gaze with confidence.

"Am I carrying the king's child?" she asked.

"No. You are not."

Instead of leaving immediately, as he did each morning, he continued staring at her until she felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. For a moment, she thought he was about to speak. Instead he turned suddenly and left the room.

Gilana released her pent up breath and glanced at Rozamond who stood, her expression tense, by the closed door.

"I wish you would hurry up and get with child," said the maid. "That fortune teller gives me the spooks."

"Rozamond, fetch my blue silk gown and have a messenger sent to the king at once."

"Of course, my lady. What message should he send?"

"That I wish to see him today."

Gilana had about all she could take of her husband's secrecy. By only seeing her at night and having the damn soothsayer visit her every morning, the man was treating her like a brood mare instead of a wife.

* * *

One week later

"What are you doing here?" Tabor demanded.

Taken aback by the annoyed edge to his voice, Gilana paused in the door of her husband's study.

"I thought we might spend some time together, if you're free. We've been married for over a week, yet I never see you by day. I'm starting to think you really are avoiding me, regardless of what you say."

He glanced at her through narrowed eyes and offered her a forced smile. "Of course I'm not avoiding you."

"Tabor, what's wrong?"

"Excuse me?"

Gilana lowered her voice so that the servants standing by the door couldn't hear. "We have been getting along so wonderfully and I thought we enjoyed spending time together, but today you're like a different man."

"Different man?" For the first time he gazed at her with an expression of genuine concern. He stood from the table where he had been poring over parchments and placed gentle hands on her shoulders. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that last night you were far more approachable. I don't know what sort of game you're playing, Tabor, but I am not amused by it."

"My darling, please forgive me. I've been preoccupied with my duties and I fear it has affected my temper." He gazed into her eyes, difficult when he squinted so much.

"Maybe you should rest, Your Majesty. So much reading seems to have irritated your eyes."

"What?"

"You're squinting."

His jaw tightened. "What do you mean squinting?"

Gilana gazed at him, suspicions forming in her mind, though she forced herself to say, "I didn't mean to offend you. I'm just concerned for your welfare."

"Perhaps you're right. I do have a bit of a headache."

"Why don't we go for a walk outside? It's a beautiful day and some exercise might help you relax."

"I don't think I could tolerate the sunlight at the moment. You go. Enjoy yourself, and I'll see you tonight."

Gilana nodded, her gaze sweeping him. Something was definitely not right with her husband. If she didn't know better, she would truly have thought he was two different men. Everything about him seemed to change from night to day.

With another forced smile, he took her hand in what was meant to appear like an affectionate gesture, yet his grip was loose, as if he loathed touching her. Still, it was enough for her to realize that this man's hands were even smoother than her own.

For a moment she forgot to breathe. She no longer suspected that she was involved with two different men. She knew it.

Though her first impulse was to demand that the person in front of her explain the deception, gut instinct told her that she should question her bedmate first. He seemed the more approachable of the two.

Anger and a hint of fear boiled inside her as she left the chamber. Why was the king lying to her? Even more important, which of the two men was the real king?

* * *

Jehf glanced up from his book when he heard the bolts on the outside of his door slide open. Though he couldn't tell the hour in his windowless cell, he knew it was not nearly time for him to meet Gilana. Surely it was no later than noon?

Four guards stepped into the chamber followed by a tall man in a white hooded cloak. Eyes such a dark green that they appeared almost black fixed on Jehf who jumped to his feet. The hooded man stirred feelings of uneasy terror deep inside him.

"Who are you?" he asked the stranger.

The guards clutched Jehf's arms, but he struggled, kicking two of them with his powerful legs. Realizing that he must no longer be useful to the king, fury and terror overcame him. The bastard had lied and Jehf was going to be killed. His family was probably dead already. His Cavern Dancer's strength served Jehf well during the fight.

For a moment, he broke free and lunged at the hooded bastard who had been watching the struggle like a demonic judge.

Before Jehf's hands closed around the demon's throat, four more guards burst into the cell. It took six to pin him to the floor, and two to bend his head back and force open his mouth. The hooded demon knelt beside Jehf and poured several drops of a foul tasting liquid down his throat. Almost immediately, the strength fled Jehf's body. He lay immobile, unable to speak, though he tried in vain to move his limbs, even blink his eyes.

One of the guards said, "Is he --"

"Dead," stated another. "Let's get rid of the body."

"I will do it," the cloaked man spoke in a deep yet soft voice, like that of a purring devil.

"But the king said --"

"That *I* am to do away with him. You are merely my servants in this task. Wrap him in this." The demon slipped a black funeral shroud from the folds of his cloak. "Then take him to Xavier's Mouth and place him in the boat you find there."

Several of the guards exchanged nervous glances, but were obviously unwilling to argue with Demon Eyes.

Jehf had never felt so helpless. All his senses were fully alive, yet to these guards he appeared dead. How could he escape if he couldn't move? Even worse, what the hell was the hooded bastard going to do with him when they reached Xavier's Mouth?

For the next hour, Jehf was blinded by the dark cover of the burial shroud. After being flung into the back of a wagon, he bounced painfully against the wooden floor as the horses galloped over the rugged path toward the sea. Finally, the wagon stopped. By the savagely howling wind and the sound of waves crashing against the rocks, Jehf guessed they had reached Xavier's Mouth, the roughest inlet in the entire continent. Unused for centuries, Xavier's Mouth was thought to be cursed. Supposedly the ghosts of the many sailors who had died, smashed against rocks as sharp as dragons' teeth and sucked to the depths by the fierce undercurrent, haunted the savage waters.

Though he heard bits of the guards' conversation, none of it gave him any insight to his fate. Dumped onto yet another bed of wood, he waited to the harsh yet rhythmic rocking of waves. Water dampened his shroud and clothes beneath, soaking through to his skin. He wasn't sure how much time passed, but the guards finally stopped speaking and he sensed they were no longer present. The boat lurched slightly as someone stepped into it, then it moved out to sea.

The shroud was finally cut away and Jehf gazed into the emerald eyes of the hooded man. Again, he tried moving and speaking to no avail. Surely if his captor intended to dump him into the sea, he would have done it by now. A tiny boat on such rough waters would undoubtedly sink. If only Jehf could move then he might have a chance of surviving in the water.

They drifted for several hours. Without sails or rowing, Jehf wondered how the hooded man navigated the vessel, especially when the skies blackened and a thunderstorm threatened to destroy them.

Where were they going? Why had he not tried killing Jehf yet? More important, when would he regain control over his body or was the poison he had been forced to swallow permanent?

A short time later, Jehf was able to move his limbs slightly. Hope kindled inside him. If his strength returned soon, he didn't doubt he could overpower his captor and return home.

Almost as quickly as it came, the storm faded into a clear, sunny day. The hooded man stood at the bow, his gaze fixed on a distant shoreline. Land!

But what land?

Excitement coursed through Jehf.

Several moments later, Jehf's strength had fully returned. Whatever poison had been used apparently caused no lasting damage. His heart pounding, he rose to his feet. Like any true Cavern Dancer, he was as at home on the sea as he was on the land. He moved with the rocking of the boat, soundlessly, gracefully, like an extension of the sea itself.

His outstretched hands were inches from his captor's neck when the man turned suddenly, his dark eyes fixed on Jehf.

Jehf recovered quickly from his surprise and grasped the front of the man's cloak. "Give me a reason not to break your neck and leave you in a watery grave?"

The man's hands closed over Jehf's wrists. Though his grip wasn't forceful, the silver rings on his fingers seemed to turn red hot. Jehf dropped his hands, glancing at the welts on his wrists.

"One thing I hate is ingratitude."

"Ingratitude? You're trying to kill me," Jehf snapped.

"If I wanted to kill you, you'd already be dead."

Confused and angry, Jehf stared at the marks on his wrists, then glared at the man. Only one sort of creature could wear the red-hot rings without being burned. "You're a soothsayer."

"Excellent observation," came the cutting reply.

"Where are you taking me? One of Tabor's many island prisons?"

"I'm taking you to a place where you can rebuild your life."

"What about my mother and sister?"

"It is too late for them."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Overwhelmed by grief, Jehf reached for the hooded bastard once more. Again the hellish silver rings scorched his already damaged flesh.

"They are dead. Tabor saw to that on the day he took you into his palace."

Jehf's fists clenched and he cursed the tears that sprang into his eyes. "I'll kill him."

"Not in your present state."

Jehf glared, trying to swallow past a burning lump of sadness in his throat. He had just about enough of the emerald-eyed demon. Rather than attempt to grasp him again, Jehf lashed out with his foot. As if sensing the attack, the soothsayer shifted his position slightly and Jehf nearly fell over the side of the boat.

"Listen to me, you young fool. I am trying to give you the means to get everything you want. Power. Revenge. Your woman and child."

"Then Gilana *is* carrying my child?"

"She is. If you go charging back to Julius now, what do you think will happen? You will be killed."

"But I'll still have a chance to take Tabor with me."

"And give up the queen and your son?"

"Son?" Jehf might have smiled had the situation not been so terrible.

"The only way to save yourself and your offspring is through patience. The island in the distance is called Chrossmarrie. Many of the inhabitants, including the king, are Cavern Dancers. If you use your brain, you will have the opportunity to gain the necessary tools to win back your woman and child and repay your brother for all the *kindness* he has shown you."

Jehf burned with the desire for vengeance. The thought of his son being raised by Tabor sickened him, as did the idea of a woman like Gilana spending a loveless life with such a vile bastard.

"Why are you doing this?" Jehf glared. "And why should I trust you?"

"It seems to me you have little choice but to trust me. As for why, my reasons are my own."

"That's not fair."

"Life seldom is."

A short time later, the shoreline of Chrossmarrie was close enough for Jehf to reach easily.

"I don't see anyone around," Jehf observed.

"Once you reach the shore, keep heading north."

"But I don't have a --"

The demon extended his hand, palm up. A compass rested upon it. Jehf took it, careful to avoid contact with the deadly rings.

"Don't waste this opportunity, Cavern Dancer."

Jehf glanced from the soothsayer to the island. Discarding his shoes, he dove into the water and swam toward land. When he reached the shore, he glanced out at the sea only to find it covered with a mist so thick that he could no longer discern the soothsayer's boat.

Chapter Five

Gilana trembled slightly with a combination of rage and anticipation. It was late afternoon and within a few short hours, she would question her lover about his identity. First she had another meeting with the soothsayer. He hadn't come to her that morning, but had sent a message that he would see her before dinner.

She jumped at the sharp knock on her door followed by the entrance of the soothsayer. Discomfort coiled inside her, but she stood her ground and met his gaze.

"Am I carrying the king's child?"

Rather than answer directly as was his habit, the soothsayer gazed so deeply into her eyes that she nearly flinched from uneasiness. Suddenly she felt as if someone else was inside her mind, prodding and directing her thoughts. She shook her head and turned from him.

"No," he said and walked toward the door.

An idea struck her.

"Wait." Approaching him, she tried to calm her pounding heart.

His gaze met hers. "Your Majesty?"

"Am I with child?"

"Yes."

Anger stirred deep inside her. "For how long?"

"Slightly over a week."

"Then I conceived on the first night of my marriage?"

"Yes."

"Who is the father of this child?"

"You know."

"No. I know only his face, voice, and touch. I know who he pretends to be."

Gilana's fists clenched. "Just wait until I see him tonight!"

"You won't see him. He is gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"Done away with by order of the king."

A strange feeling of sadness washed over Gilana. During the short time she had spent with the imposter, she had developed feelings for him. Now all her questions would go unanswered. Even worse, she would never experience his touch or hear his voice. There would be no more whispered conversations after making love. No more tender kisses.

"Why did this happen?" she whispered, glaring at the soothsayer. "What kind of people are you?"

"You needn't worry. King Tabor will never share your bed. You will be fairly free."

"You still haven't told me who the father of my child is."

"The king's half brother."

"That explains their resemblance. It doesn't matter. Now that I know, I will end this farce of a marriage."

"Will you?"

"Of course."

"Who will believe that you did not willingly deceive your husband?"

"You know --"

"Me? I am bound to King Tabor in ways you couldn't possibly understand. If you say you are not carrying Tabor's child, your land will be forfeited to Julius and you and your son will become outcasts. If you play the game like a clever girl, you will be free of Tabor's attentions and your child will inherit the crown. If you make what has happened public, you could face imprisonment or death and your child will be an outcast."

She shot him a look of pure loathing. "You and Tabor make me sick. Are people nothing more than pawns to you?"

"We are all nothing more than pawns, Your Majesty."

Gilana's anger threatened to boil over, but she managed to speak calmly. "For the sake of my child I will keep my silence."

"A wise decision."

"But mark my words, soothsayer, I will never forget anyone's part in this deception."

A slight smile played around his finely drawn lips. "I hope not, Your Majesty."

With a nod, he left her alone in the chamber.

* * *

It took Jehf nearly a full day of walking before he found any sign of human life on the island. Finally he noticed a group of men in the distance. The divers watched him with curiosity as he approached. Unfortunately, they spoke a language completely unfamiliar to him. When he tried communicating, to his relief two of the divers spoke his tongue. Rather than delve into the politics of his situation, he simply said his single man boat had capsized off their coast and he was in need of employment and a place to stay. After explaining that he was a Cavern Dancer, the men exchanged glances.

"Follow me," said one of the divers who had introduced himself as Moe.

They walked closer to the shore where other men were diving and surfacing. They approached a tall diver with a rangy build who exuded almost animalistic power. He wore a short beard that was as black as the curly hair on his head.

For several moments, Moe conversed with the bearded diver who kept glancing at Jehf with piercing blue eyes. That probing gaze dropped to Jehf's wrists. To bandage the burns caused by the soothsayer's rings, he had bound them with cloth torn from the hem of his shirt. For a moment, he thought the diver might question him about the bandages, but he never did.

"This is Destin. He wishes to see you dive," said Moe, pointing to the top of a cliff overlooking the ocean. "The path is through the trees."

Assuming that Destin was their overseer, Jehf nodded in agreement and undressed. He strode through a small clump of trees and found the path leading up.

Hopefully his performance wouldn't suffer due to lack of practice.

Moments after diving, Jehf felt a thrill he hadn't experienced since his abduction. The water was clearer than any he had ever seen. As he swam deeper, past a variety of colorful fish and plant life gently dancing in the currents, he almost forgot his problems. He caught sight of the underground cliffs and caverns where other divers were swimming, disappearing into the narrow columns of jagged rock to search for Hell's Eyes.

Within moments, he had joined them. The cliffs extended to impressive depths. As he followed one of the divers downward, the water became dark as a moonless night. Fortunately, among Cavern Dancers' physical attributes was enhanced vision. Jehf's eyes adjusted quickly to the blackness and he began searching for the rainbow-colored jewels.

Though he wished to continue deeper, he was out of practice and knew he would soon need to surface. For a moment, he wished he had asked for a chisel. It would have made his work much easier. Using the tips of his fingers, he worked a fairly loose chunk of Hell's Eye from the side of the cliff, then began his ascent.

Gasping, he broke the surface and resisted the urge to smile. After losing his family, his lover, and his child, he shouldn't take pleasure in anything. Still, diving seemed to partially rejuvenate his wounded spirit.

He approached Destin and Moe.

"Not bad," Destin said, surprising Jehf who hadn't realized he spoke the tongue of Julius. "I am assuming you can stay below for longer?"

Jehf felt like his belly dropped to the sand. Still, he met Destin's gaze with confidence. "Due to circumstances beyond my control, I have been unable to dive for over a month. I was one of the best divers in my village and assure you that it will take me little time to get back into proper form."

Destin studied Jehf carefully.

"I see that you cannot use me at this time," Jehf said with dignity. "I will set up a camp two miles south of here where I plan to sharpen my skills again. Should you

decide that you can use another diver I hope you will consider me. This is from your claim, so I return it to you." Jehf extended his hand, offering the Hell's Eye to Destin.

Moe and Destin exchanged incredulous glances.

"You dove far enough to find this in such a short time?" Moe asked. "And without a chisel?"

"I would like you to begin working for us tomorrow," Destin stated. "Rest for today, as you've had a difficult journey. Moe will provide you with food, clothing, and shelter."

Destin turned and disappeared into the trees. Moments later, he reached the top of the cliff and performed a perfect dive into the water.

"Well, my friend, welcome to the Sea Snakes, the Royal Divers of Chrossmarrie."

"Royal?"

"We're part of the king's own team. He is a hard man to please, but you have impressed him greatly."

"The king?" Jehf's head spun.

"King Destin." Moe grinned, clapping him on the back. "Thought he was just an overseer, did you? Destin loves playing tricks like that. It's just his sense of humor. Follow me. I'll find you a room at the Snakes' quarters."

* * *

Several weeks later, Jehf felt as if he had never left the ocean. The Sea Snakes were among the greatest divers he ever had the pleasure of working with and pushed him beyond what he believed were his limits. King Destin was as talented a diver as Jehf had ever met. Though a strong ruler with high expectations of his subjects, he was fair and valued all people in a way Jehf had once thought impossible for a king.

Most amazing was that the divers were paid according to their performance. The opportunities for divers to earn seemed endless, depending on how much or little they worked. Limitations were applied for safety only, but as long as a diver was in good health and physically capable, he could become quite wealthy working as a Sea Snake.

Jehf dedicated his every waking moment to the sea. Once he earned enough to

return to Julius... What would he do? How could he possibly save enough to compete with Tabor's wealth? Perhaps he only needed enough to kidnap his son and Gilana. No, that was completely ridiculous. She was a queen. What made him think she would give up her power, wealth, and reputation to marry a diver, even if he was one of the revered Sea Snakes?

One night while sitting alone by a fire on the beach, he thought about the events of the past few months and searched for options. In spite of what common sense dictated, he was not prepared to give his child to Tabor so easily. Not only that, something had started to develop between him and Gilana. If circumstances had been different, would they have fallen in love? More craziness. If he hadn't been forced to assume the role of her lover, what chance would he have had to meet a queen, let alone make love with one? Unlike the Sea Snakes of Chrossmarrie, the divers of his village were little more than slaves.

"Sometimes I wonder what goes on behind those eyes of yours." King Destin approached, a half smile on his lips. He folded his arms across his chest and held Jehf's gaze.

"Your Majesty." Jehf began rising to his feet, but Destin gestured for him to remain seated as he joined him.

"While most of these divers gossip and brag, you speak little of yourself, yet your talent hints at many possibilities about your past. Wherever you came from, you must be greatly missed."

"You have the right to question me and the right to exile me if I refuse to answer."

Destin laughed. "I don't think that will be necessary at this time, though I must admit you've piqued my curiosity. Sometimes in order to gain, you must open up to people who can offer you opportunities."

Destin's words intrigued Jehf, yet his secrets were too deep to trust with just anyone, especially a king. He knew all too well the evil such men were capable of.

"I'm not a fool, Jehf. A man such as yourself doesn't simply crawl out of the sea

and into my fold without a lengthy story to tell. Whether or not you want to trust me is your choice, but whatever it is you tried to run away from, you'll never escape it."

"What makes you think I'm running from anything?"

"Unlike the rulers of most lands, the kings of Chrossmarrie are not chosen through birth, but through skill, strength, and use of the mind. If I didn't have keen insight, I would have lost my throne by now. A man need only to look in your eyes, Jehf, to see that you didn't end up here by accident."

"If you think I'm trying to harm you or Chrossmarrie in any way --"

"If I thought that, you wouldn't be here right now, but in exile or rotting in my dungeon."

"I am grateful to you."

"Just keep diving for me." Destin stood, his piercing blue gaze fixed on Jehf's. "Don't give me a reason to doubt your motives and you will have a place in Chrossmarrie for the rest of your life."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

With a final discerning glance, Destin left Jehf alone with his thoughts.

Stretching out on his side, Jehf closed his eyes and listened to the soothing rhythm of the tide behind him. The breeze caressed his skin and hair, reminding him of Gilana's feathery touches. Not a day passed when he didn't think of her and their child. Were they happy and well? Did she long for him as he longed for her? The nights spent with her had been among the best and worst times of his life. He'd never been so happy with anyone, yet he hated the deception.

His thoughts drifted to the wonderful feelings she stirred when she touched and kissed him. Resting there, he could almost feel the tip of her tongue circling his ear and stroking his neck. Her soft little hands caressed his chest and slipped down his belly. Gentle fingers curled around his stiffening cock and danced delicately over its head.

It would feel so good to bury his staff deep inside her!

Jehf opened his eyes, his heart pounding. Gods, he needed her! She was like the finest liquor swimming through his veins, turning him into a creature of pure sexuality.

He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. Glancing down at his cock that threatened to burst through his loincloth, he cursed himself for having less control than a horny youth.

He stood and disappeared into the woods, ignoring the call from some of the other divers to join them for a drink before sleeping. With his heightened vision, he easily made his way through the dark tangle of trees and roots to a brook where he sometimes went when he needed privacy.

Constantly shaded by trees, the water was usually cool. He stripped off his loincloth and waded in. After several moments of swimming, he realized that his heightened sexual state wasn't about to fade, at least not without more help than a cold bath could offer.

Stepping out of the water, he shivered as much from desire as from the chill of the forest. His fist curled around his cock and he stroked himself, closing his eyes tightly and imagining it was Gilana's hand upon him. He pictured her beautiful eyes gazing into his and the loveliness of her creamy breasts tipped with rose-colored nipples. He imagined licking those nipples, tracing the areola until bumps of pleasure rose on the tender flesh.

Jehf's breathing quickened and he rubbed his cock faster and harder. He recalled how good it felt to kiss Gilana, to taste the warmth of her lips and tongue while her smooth legs wrapped around his waist. Buried so deep inside her drenched pussy, his cock ached with need.

In his hand, his rod swelled even more. To extend the pleasure, he slowed his caress and forced his breathing under control. Still, he couldn't stop the pounding of his heart. Thinking about her made him lose all reason.

The wind tousled his hair and in it he could hear her whispering in his ear, "Please, oh, please."

In his mind, her pussy clamped relentlessly around his cock. Unable to control himself any longer, Jehf's hand tightened and he rubbed himself as fast as he could. Gasping, he rode his climax with flexing knees and bucking hips as his seed spilled

onto the forest floor.

* * *

The following morning, Jehf awoke early and was among the first Sea Snakes to reach the top of the cliff to dive. Destin was already there, sharpening his chisel with a piece of stone.

At first Jehf had wondered about Destin's obsession with diving. A man in his position wasn't expected to perform physical labor. Still, diving was in a Cavern Dancer's blood. Jehf remembered all too well how lost he felt when separated from the ocean for any length of time. The king's dedication to the Sea Snakes only reinforced his respect for the man.

"You're here early, Your Majesty."

Destin smiled. "I snuck out at dawn before any of my advisors could stop me."

"Looks like an excellent day for diving."

"I've noticed what I think is a new cavern. Three of my best divers are going to explore it with me this morning and I'd like you to join us."

"Of course."

"Let's go. The others are waiting for us below."

Destin dove first and Jehf followed. They swam for several moments before sinking deeper into the depths. Destin guided them to the area he had mentioned, a place far deeper than their usual mining grounds. By the time they reached the cavern, Jehf doubted they would have much time to search for Hell's Eyes before they needed to surface. Still, the jewels were so plentiful that the sides of the cavern glittered with them.

The divers had just begun chiseling when a strange tremor cut through the water. Beneath Jehf's palm, the cavern wall quivered. Another ripple followed, even stronger than the first. Nearly overcome by panic, Jehf glanced around, then ducked chunks of rock as the cliff started crumbling. An earthquake!

The three divers who had accompanied Jehf and Destin were already swimming toward the surface, trying to dodge falling rocks.

Jehf began swimming upward as fast as he could. A chunk of rock struck him in the shoulder, flipping him over. Before he righted himself, he caught sight of Destin trapped at the bottom of the cavern, trying desperately to free his leg from a cluster of rocks.

His heart pounding, Jehf glanced upward. He could save himself, but if he returned for the king, neither of them would likely survive. Destin glanced at Jehf. Even in the dimness, he saw resignation in the king's eyes. The man might have begged for help with a look, but he didn't.

Rather than swim for the surface, Jehf descended as fast as he could and began helping Destin dig his way out of the rocks. With each passing moment, the men were in greater danger of not only being crushed, but of drowning.

Suddenly Destin jerked his leg free. His ankle and shin were mangled, but it didn't seem to hinder the king as he and Jehf swam upward.

Halfway to the surface, Destin began to lose use of his injured leg. Jehf grasped him and continued ascending. A glance upward revealed a surface that seemed too far away. Jehf's lungs felt ready to burst and he suddenly realized that his shoulder where the rock had struck him was aflame. The divers, having finally noticed their companions were missing, returned to lend aid. For the first time since he was a child, Jehf failed in holding his breath long enough to reach the surface. He gasped, inhaling a lung full of water. One of his companions forced his face above the water. Coughing and gasping, Jehf was dragged onto shore where he lay, scarcely believing that he had survived.

A comforting hand rested on his back and one of the divers said, "You got quite a gash there."

Jehf glanced at his profusely bleeding shoulder.

Destin, who had regained some of his strength, dragged himself closer to Jehf and held his gaze. "I owe you my life."

"I think you would have done the same for me."

"We are bound forever, like brothers." Destin extended his hand and Jehf

grasped it tightly. He knew the king's words were not a formality based on gratitude, but the truth. When two Cavern Dancers escaped the Water God's wrath together, they created a bond deeper than friendship and as pure as blood.

Chapter Six

Two Years Later

Gilana stood beneath the shade of a willow tree, watching her son who sat beside the soothsayer. Prince Talon smiled as he named the objects drawn on wooden blocks that the emerald-eyed man pointed to. Sometimes the boy's intelligence overwhelmed her, but that probably resulted from her bias as a mother.

At first she hadn't been happy about having a child, especially one conceived by such devious methods. Still, from the moment she saw Talon, she had fallen in love, much like she had fallen in love with his father. Or *could* have fallen in love, had the circumstances been different. Many nights she lay awake wishing for the man who had made love to her so tenderly, who had talked and laughed with her during their short time together. Now he was dead and she was to spend the rest of her life with King Tabor. At least the bastard made a point not to bother her, except for brief, monthly visits to the child. Though he took no interest in raising Talon, he wanted to make sure the boy knew who his father was. Unless she wished to see both of them exiled, Gilana had no choice but to continue the façade.

Living under such pretences galled her. Every day she despised Tabor more than the last, but for some strange reason she couldn't completely detest the soothsayer, in spite of his involvement in the deception.

On the night the young prince was born, the midwife had successfully delivered the child, but if not for the soothsayer's expertise with healing, Gilana would have died. Though glad for her life, the thought of being indebted to the soothsayer frustrated her, as did the man's interest in her son.

Directly after Talon was born, Gilana recalled Tabor and the soothsayer speaking

close to her bedside. Her mind still hazy from pain and the herbs she'd been forced to drink, she had still comprehended their words.

"This will likely be my only heir, as securing this one was difficult enough," Tabor had said. Even Gilana, in her muddled state, noticed how the king slurred his words. Rage simmered beneath her exhaustion. Difficult? The bastard should have tried giving birth. "I command you to do everything in your power to keep him safe and ensure that he inherits the throne."

"You're certain that's what you want?" the soothsayer asked.

"Yes."

The soothsayer's eyes gleamed in his pale face and the slightest smile tugged at his lips. "As I am bound, I will follow your command."

Since the king had made the soothsayer the boy's protector, he took his duty quite seriously. At first Gilana kept careful watch over the emerald-eyed man, but in spite of his strangeness, he was gentle with the young prince, even if he did seem to demand knowledge and behavior from the boy that shouldn't be expected from a two-year-old. Oddly enough, the prince adored him. Despite her anger toward the soothsayer, she had to admit he was a far better male influence on her son than the king could ever be. Still, in her heart she knew the best influence of all would have been the boy's real father, a man who had been as much a victim as Gilana herself. When she had looked into his eyes, she had sensed that he possessed a kind and loyal heart. What a terrible waste of life. She wondered, as she had so many times over the past years, what his real name had been. Where had he come from? What would have happened had they met before she wed Tabor?

The darkening sky shook her thoughts from the past. She approached the tree and gathered her son into her arms. "It's going to rain. We should go home."

The soothsayer stood, his gaze cast toward the distant shoreline. "Yes, the king will want to see you. A messenger is coming by ship and will arrive tonight."

Gilana squinted toward the sea. There was certainly no sign of a ship. Still, she had never known the soothsayer to be wrong.

"What kind of message?" she asked.

"One that will be of great interest to you."

"In what way?"

He didn't reply as he escorted her and the prince home. Gilana knew that no amount of prodding or threats would convince him to speak when he didn't want to. He seemed to derive some sort of perverted pleasure in planting seeds of doubt and curiosity.

At the palace, she turned the prince over to Rozamond, then decided on a long, hot bath before dinner. She had just finished her soak, when a maid arrived with a message that she was to see the king immediately.

Gilana dressed and met Tabor in his sitting room, since she was never invited to his bedchamber. The arrangement suited her perfectly.

Tabor was seated by the fire, gazing at the flames. He glanced at Gilana once as she approached and didn't bother offering her a chair. She sat anyway.

"I have just received a message from the king of Chrossmarrie. It seems that they have finally expressed an interest in relations with us. Next week, King Destin will arrive with his Chief Advisor. They specifically asked to meet with both of us, so I expect you to be present when requested and make an extra effort to act like our union is a happy one."

"When have I ever insinuated otherwise?"

Tabor turned his frozen gaze to her. "I just wanted to make clear how important this meeting is to both of our kingdoms. Chrossmarrie has probably discovered that our two lands are now closely linked because of our marriage and I'm sure that prompted Destin's interest in us. I don't want anything to interfere with relations between us and Chrossmarrie."

Chrossmarrie was one of the wealthiest, most powerful kingdoms in the world. Tabor had spent years trying to form an alliance with them only to be ignored.

"I want the alliance as much as you do, Tabor. After all, our kingdom must be strong when our son assumes leadership."

Tabor's lips thinned into a forced smile and his gaze returned to the fireplace. "Yes. Our son. He looks quite like me, don't you think?"

It was Gilana's turn to force a smile. The prince resembled his father, from his wide-set green eyes to his pleasant disposition. "There is a family resemblance."

The king curled his lip and shivered visibly. "I hope that the negotiations are swift. The people of Chrossmarrie are little better than barbarians. Their leaders need not be of royal blood and from what I understand, their current king is a Cavern Dancer."

"I've heard they are a noble people."

"Rubbish." Tabor flicked his hand in a dismissive gesture. "You may go."

Gilana swept out of the room, her blood pounding with rage. Each time she met with Tabor she despised him more. So often it crossed her mind to plan his assassination, but it was too risky. Before doing anything chancy, she at least had to wait until her son was able to care for himself.

* * *

Jehf could scarcely control his excitement when his ship docked at Julius' main port. It had been two years since he had last visited his homeland. After rescuing King Destin from near death beneath the sea, the two men had become inseparable companions. Jehf had confided in the king about the circumstances leading up to his arrival in Chrossmarrie. Destin had provided the means for Jehf to find out if his mother and sister were indeed dead.

Unfortunately, the soothsayer had been telling the truth, so Destin immediately offered his services in helping Jehf seek revenge against his half brother. While the idea of payback was tempting, Jehf desired something else even more. He wanted his child and the woman he had left behind.

"So, this is your homeland," Destin said, pausing beside Jehf on the ship's deck. "Are you ready, my friend?"

"More than ready."

During his time in Chrossmarrie, Destin had provided him with an education

worthy of a king. With his intelligence and courage, Jehf had quickly become Destin's Chief Advisor, a position of power and wealth that certainly rivaled Tabor's. Now more than able to provide security for a wife and child, Jehf was not going to leave Julius without them.

Once he and Destin left the ship, they were greeted by Julius' royal guards who escorted them to the palace.

Jehf's stomach tightened with rage when he thought of the last time he'd been to the palace. How easily Tabor had destroyed his former life, but now Jehf had built another one.

* * *

On the day King Destin and his Chief Advisor arrived, Gilana spent the morning with her son, then left him in the soothsayer's care while she joined Tabor in greeting their visitors.

Standing side by side in the great hall, she and her husband didn't so much as glance at one another, but kept their gazes fixed on the small party walking toward them. Several guards of Chrossmarrie marched with the members of Tabor's royal guard who escorted King Destin and his Chief Advisor.

Something in the way the Chief Advisor walked tugged painfully at Gilana's memories. He reminded her of the prince's blood father, the only man she might ever have allowed herself to love.

As they neared, Gilana's heart pounded and her breath caught in her throat. She heard an audible gasp from Tabor as well. Though dressed in elegant clothes and standing alongside a king, the Chief Advisor was undoubtedly Tabor's brother, a man who was supposedly dead.

Accustomed to disguising her true feelings, Gilana recovered quickly and glanced in Tabor's direction. She credited the bastard with promptly regaining his self-control, though she didn't miss the surprised and angry gleam in his squinty eyes.

One of the guards stepped forward. "Your Majesties, I present King Destin of Chrossmarrie and Chief Advisor Jehf."

Gilana and Tabor nodded in greeting, their gazes fixed on the Chief Advisor.

"Forgive me for staring," Tabor said, "but you look remarkably like my deceased half brother."

Destin laughed. "I was just thinking how much my Chief Advisor resembles you. If I didn't know better, I would swear you are related."

Jehf smiled. "I consider it an honor to resemble the king of a fine land such as Julius."

"It seems almost impossible to believe the two of you are not related," Gilana said. Her gaze locked with Jehf's, her heart pounding. No matter what anyone said, she knew who this man was. The way he looked at her now proved it. Those fathomless green eyes were forever burned into her heart and mind.

"Perhaps somewhere in our lineage," Jehf said. "My mother's people came from this land."

"Really?" Tabor's face froze. "Well, I'm sure you would like to rest after your journey. We shall meet again at dinner."

Relieved that the initial meeting was over, Gilana waited until the guests had left the hall before she headed for her chamber. Before she reached the door, Tabor's hand closed around her upper arm and he forced her to look at him.

"Something's wrong?" Gilana asked.

"What is your impression of the Chief Advisor?"

Her insides twisted with a combination of fury and gladness. By the look in the bastard's eyes she could tell that he had truly thought his brother was dead. Now he was trying to decide just how much Gilana suspected about his deception.

"I'm not sure," she replied, sounding repulsively innocent even to herself. "After we speak with him longer, I'll be able to give a more informed --"

"I mean what do you make of his appearance?" Tabor snapped.

"It's remarkable how much he looks like you, except his features are not as fine, I think. Perhaps you are related after all?"

Tabor stared into her eyes as if searching for some sign that she wasn't as

oblivious as she seemed. Finally some of the tenseness seemed to drain from him and he released her. "Don't be late for dinner."

"Of course not." Gilana bowed slightly and swept out of the hall, her emotions battling inside her. Her son's father was alive, not dead as the soothsayer had suggested. The soothsayer! When she got her hands on the demon, she was going to kill him! Even the knowledge that he could probably destroy her with a glance didn't lessen her fury. She was tired of people playing with her life. Was there a man in Julius who could speak without lying?

Stepping into her son's chamber, Gilana stared at the soothsayer who was seated on a chair, the young prince on his knee and a storybook in his hand. Careful to disguise her fury, she approached and took the boy.

"It's time for bed, Talon," she said. The boy squirmed, reaching for the soothsayer who remained seated, his penetrating gaze fixed on Gilana.

Placing the book aside, he stood and walked to the door. "I'll meet you in the sitting room."

It took several moments before Talon settled down enough to sleep. Gilana hated to admit her usually endless patience with her son waned in the face of tonight's discovery.

In the adjoining sitting room, she found the soothsayer standing by the window looking more devilish than ever with his stark skin and snow-white robe.

He raised an eyebrow in question as she approached him. Without warning, she struck his face as hard as she could. Though her forceful blow left a bright red imprint against his pale cheek, he didn't so much as flinch.

"You told me Talon's father was dead, you bastard."

"No. I said he was done away with by order of the king."

Grinding her teeth and clenching her fists, Gilana paced the room. One thing she had learned after two years in the soothsayer's company was that he often twisted words to suit himself.

"I should never have let my guard down with you," she whispered, more to

herself than to her strange companion. "Is there anyone in this damn palace who isn't involved in some kind of conspiracy?"

It was bad enough that she had been dragged into Tabor's world, but the thought of Talon growing up under his influence sickened her more with each passing day. Pausing in front of the soothsayer, she pulled back her hand to hit him again, but he grasped her wrist and shoved her into a chair.

"I think once is enough, Your Majesty."

"I'm beginning to think my son and I are better off taking our chances in exile. I should admit Talon isn't Tabor's and be done with it."

The soothsayer smiled slightly, though the expression in his eyes was anything but amused. "That's the idea, but you must wait until the time is right."

"I don't know or care what you're talking about. Everything out of your mouth is a lie."

"I never lie."

"I think you're starting to believe your own twisted stories."

"I don't lie because there is more than one way to interpret the truth. Do you want Tabor to get what's coming to him? Do you want your son to keep his throne?"

"Forgive me if I have little faith in anything you say. First you tell me I can never reveal Talon's paternity, now you're telling me to do just that."

"That's because things have changed since we last had this sort of conversation."

"What things?"

"Are you blind? Most obviously, the boy's father is now in a position to marry a queen."

"That still won't change the fact that I will lose my country and my title if it becomes known that my son belongs to anyone but Tabor."

"Not if his conspiracy becomes public knowledge."

"That might work if the Chief Advisor backs me, but the man is pretending to be someone else. Why should he risk his political position over an affair that happened two years ago? Even if he did, with the archaic mentality of the judges in both Julius

and Minor Ives, there's little chance they will rule in our favor."

"So you would rather spend the rest of your life with Tabor?"

"As I said, we don't even know how Jehf feels about --"

"Jehf will feel exactly as you do in regards to your son. Take my advice, when the time comes and a trial is demanded, go willingly. I swear on my soul, King Tabor will get exactly what he deserves."

Gilana held his gaze for a moment. From the little she knew about the soothsayer's race, they considered their souls to be sacred and guarded them well. For one to so much as hint at using his soul as a means of emphasis meant that he must, for once, be telling the truth. Still, Gilana knew the soothsayer too well to leap at his advice or his offers.

"And what does he deserve? Speak clearly this time, sir. I will no longer tolerate games."

"He deserves to be exposed as the conniving bastard he is."

At the look of pure hatred in the soothsayer's eyes, Gilana felt as if her blood froze in her veins. For the first time in her life, she believed him without question. She had no idea he despised Tabor so much.

"If you hate the king, why do you serve him?"

"Typical royalty," he muttered, holding her gaze. "You think yours is the only life with complications?"

"Are you going to answer me?"

He stared at her for a long, searching moment before striding out of the room.

After checking on Talon, Gilana left her son in Rozamond's care, then returned to her chamber. She had three hours until dinner and needed every moment to sort through her emotions so she could make the best decision for her son.

As she passed Tabor's private rooms, she heard the sound of glass breaking and paused.

"I never imagined you could be so incompetent!" Tabor snarled. "I told you I wanted him done away with!"

"I did as you asked," the soothsayer spoke so softly that Gilana had to strain to hear him. "Ask the guards who assisted me if he was not dead after I gave him the poison."

"Then how do you explain the bastard standing alive and well in my conference room?"

"It's very rare, but some people revive after ingesting certain poisons. Apparently that's what happened. Perhaps it is because he is a Cavern Dancer. Like my people, their constitution is different from that of humans. It would also explain how, if he were to awaken in the sea, he could have somehow survived in the water."

"This is a complication we don't need!"

"I agree it inspires tremendous anxiety, Your Majesty, however it is a situation that can be overcome."

"And it will be. Just keep in mind the command I gave you on the night my son was born. You must ensure that he will one day be king of Julius."

"According to our bond, I must obey your commands. Once your order is given, it cannot be revoked, so I am fated to protect the boy, even at the cost of my own life. Talon will be king. That I promise you."

"Good." Tabor sighed so deeply that Gilana heard him through the wall. "And you know that any harm that befalls me also befalls you, so my son and I are safe under your protection, soothsayer."

At the sound of footsteps, Gilana lifted her dress and fled to her rooms. What sort of game was the soothsayer playing? Was he on her side or on Tabor's? What did Tabor mean that whatever harm befell him also befell the soothsayer? Such a creature was slave to no one. He could destroy a mere human with a thought, yet Tabor spoke to him like he was a servant. Perhaps that was why the soothsayer regarded the king with such hatred.

By the time she reached her chamber, Gilana had calmed her racing heart, though she still struggled over what she should do about Chief Advisor Jehf's accusation. More than anything, she wanted Talon safe and the chance to build a life

with a man she had spent two years dreaming about. She also longed for revenge against Tabor.

She allowed her maid to unfasten the row of tiny buttons on the back of her dress, then sent the woman away. Wearing only her stockings and shift, Gilana dropped onto a chair, one leg dangling over the arm, her head resting against the cushioned back. Her eyes slipped shut and she tried to focus.

Someone tapped on the door. Assuming it was her maid who had stepped out seconds ago, she said, "Come in."

Gilana opened her eyes and her heart nearly flew through her ribs as Chief Advisor Jehf stepped into her chamber.

Chapter Seven

Surprised by the Chief Advisor's visit, all the important questions she wanted to ask him flew out of her mind. Instead, she demanded, "How did you get past the guards in our wing?"

"The soothsayer let me in."

"Him again." Gilana gritted her teeth, unsure of whether the soothsayer was her worst enemy or her best friend. One thing was certain, the man was more manipulative than Tabor ever was.

"How is your son?"

Gilana knew her smile must appear as savage as she felt. "*My* son? He is well."

His eyes, filled with emotion, gazed deeply into hers. He lifted his hand toward her face, but before he touched her cheek, he let his arm drop back to his side. "Before we speak another word, I must know something. Do you have any feelings for me at all, Gilana?"

"What do you think?"

"I think we scarcely got a chance to know each other. Even so, you're all I've been able to think about for these past two years. There's so much I want to tell you, so much I want to share with you, but I didn't come back here to ruin your life."

"Then why did you return? For vengeance? If that's the reason I can hardly blame you."

"If getting vengeance means that I will harm you or your son, then I want no part of it."

"*Our* son."

The slightest smile touched his lips. "Then you are willing to admit this publicly?"

"That depends. If I do and the judges find me guilty of deceiving Tabor, my son and I will be stripped of our titles and banished. I'm far more concerned for him than for myself."

"Our son will never want for anything. As Chief Advisor of Chrossmarrie, I have more wealth than Tabor could ever hope to possess. We could destroy Julius and Minor Ives with but a thought, you realize this?"

"I don't want to see anyone destroyed except Tabor."

"Then we are in agreement?"

"We are."

"I have one last request."

"What?"

Grasping her upper arms, he tugged her close to his chest. Gilana's entire body tingled and her head spun at the familiar hardness and warmth of his body against hers.

"That you allow us to pick up where we left off," he whispered against her lips.

She slipped her arms around his neck as he covered her mouth with a kiss deeper than the sea itself.

Each stroke of his tongue against hers seemed directly connected to her clit. It throbbed and ached with all the unfulfilled need of the past two years. She buried her hands in his hair, loving its soft, thick texture sliding between her fingers.

Jehf broke the kiss only to trace the shape of her ear with his tongue. He nibbled the lobe and said in a husky whisper, "I've dreamed of this moment for so long. Do you have any idea how much I've missed you?"

"Yes, oh yes," she breathed, clinging to him tightly as he kissed along the side of her neck. Though they had only known each other over the course of a week, an unbreakable bond had been forged between them. "I don't know why, but I've never felt as close to any man as I do to you."

"My people have a belief that when two souls are meant to be together, they recognize one another instantly. That's why arranged marriages are not allowed among

Cavern Dancers.”

“Really? I didn’t... know... that.” Gilana’s voice drifted as his deft fingers unfastened the ties on the front of her shift and his hands parted the fabric so that he could kiss her bare breasts.

First his tongue flicked over her nipple, then he sucked it between his lips and gently nibbled it. While his mouth continued its sensual torment, his hand teased her other breast. He cupped the globe and squeezed it tenderly, then used his thumb to trace the areola and finally the sensitive top of the nipple itself.

Closing her eyes, Gilana covered his hand with one of hers and used her other to press his head closer to her breast. Wonderful sensations washed over her, weakening her legs so much that she would have sunk to the ground had Jehf not lifted her in his arms. She moaned in protest, wishing for his hands and mouth on her breasts again.

Jehf chuckled. “What an appetite you have, Your Majesty.”

“You’re the only man who has ever been able to rouse it.”

“Gilana, you have no idea how good that makes me feel.”

He placed her on the bed and bent, kissing her mouth and trailing his fingertip across her cheek. Gilana gazed at him, her pulse fluttering with desire and anticipation. For so long she had dreamed of being with him again, but the fantasies were not nearly as wonderful as the reality. His scent, touch, and the low timbre of his voice did more than simply arouse her. They enchanted her, soothing her like the strongest wine, tempting her like the most decadent sweets.

Jehf slipped his hands under her shift and slowly slid her stockings down her legs. He tugged them off and tossed them aside. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he took one of her feet in his hands and raised it to his lips. Stroking her heel and toes with his fingertips, he covered the top of her foot with feathery kisses. Lust gleamed in his eyes, yet he slowly trailed kisses over her shin while pushing her shift up to her waist. The tip of his tongue traced the shape of her knee while his hand caressed her inner thigh.

“Oh, Jehf,” she murmured, pressing her head into the pillow. In spite of her aroused state, his kisses and caresses soothed her.

Placing her leg on the bed, he bent and covered her inner thigh with kisses. His tongue ran up and down the soft, sensitive flesh. Though he had yet to touch it, Gilana's clit ached. Her pussy felt hot and wet, so ready for him to fill her, yet he obviously wanted to extend their passion for as long as possible. For a moment, his mouth hovered over her clit, his breath warming and teasing it through her undergarments.

Suddenly she felt him leave the bed and her eyes flew open. Her breath caught as she watched him rip off his clothes and fling them aside. Good heavens, he was even more magnificent than she remembered. Every muscle in his tall, lean body was carved to perfection. She ached to run her hands and lips over his smooth flesh. Most fascinating of all was his cock that stood out so thick and hard, summoning her proudly.

He finished undressing and returned to the bed. Unable to resist, Gilana sat up and began kissing every inch of his chest. Her fingers kneaded and stroked the hard muscles and outlined his ribs. Whimpering with delight, she flicked her tongue over his nipples, then licked her way down to his navel and swirled the tip of her tongue inside it.

"Gilana," he groaned, burying his hands in her hair when she clasped his cock and took its ruby head into her mouth.

His scent filled her and she squirmed with need. Using her teeth and lips on him, she felt him shudder with passion. Over and over her tongue laved his cockhead. Though she thought it impossible, his rod swelled even more in her hands.

"Stop, Gilana. Stop!" He grasped her hair and pulled her away, not hard enough to hurt her, but merely to end the carnal torture. His chest rose and fell with his excited breathing and his green eyes seemed to glow with desire. "I've wanted you so badly for such a long time that my control isn't what it should be. I feel like a young boy with his first woman. By all the gods, you're so beautiful."

He tugged her face to his and kissed her with such passion that he nearly stole her breath. Gilana clung to him, wanting him desperately. She took his face in her hands and kissed his lips, brow, and over each eye. In between kisses she murmured

breathlessly, "Oh, please, Jehf. I need you so much. I want to feel you inside me again. Please take me now."

Already he was removing her shift with such fervor that the material tore. Neither of them cared. Gilana only wanted her clothes off and her bare skin pressed against his.

A moment later, she lay naked beneath him.

"Gilana, my love," he whispered against her lips, his forearms braced on either side of her head. Their gazes locked as he entered her, inch by fabulous inch, until his hot, straining cock was buried to the hilt in her dewy passage.

"Jehf," she panted, clinging to him and thrusting her hips upward. "I've missed you so much. I want you. I want you!"

"Yes, my love. My darling Gilana." He kissed her forehead and cheeks. His tongue circled her lips, then thrust into her mouth. Hers met it, stroking and searching, until he trapped it between his lips and sucked it in time with the frantic thrusting of his cock.

Gilana's entire body was on fire. Her breasts pressed against his chest and her arms and legs clung to him tightly.

Yes, yes, yes!

"Ah!" he cried softly, as if struggling to repress the vocal expression of his lust.

She well understood the need to keep their lovemaking quiet. Should they be discovered, the consequences would be horrible.

At that moment, she didn't want to think about anything except how she was filled with this wonderful man's rapidly thrusting cock.

"Yes!" she whispered close to his ear, her breathing ragged. "Oh, yes! Just a little more, my love. I'm almost there. Almost. Oh, Jehf! Jehf!"

She convulsed in heart-pounding waves of orgasm that shook her from the roots of her hair to the bottoms of her feet. Clinging to him, she struggled to keep from shrieking with passion. Instead, she buried her lips against his shoulder and moaned like a woman in pain. Indeed she was suffering the sweetest agony she had ever

experienced.

With several more hard thrusts, he exploded, gasping, every muscle in his body rigid. Moments later, he collapsed atop her, hot and panting.

"I love you, Jehf," she whispered. "I never want to be apart from you again."

"I swear by all the gods, I will do everything in my power to see that you, Talon, and I will be a family. I will die before leaving without the two of you by my side."

Though his words touched her deeply, Gilana prayed with all her heart that the three of them would end up safe and together. The thought of losing either Talon or Jehf was far too painful.

* * *

That night, Gilana dressed carefully for dinner, choosing a simple yet elegant gown of forest green. Her maid arranged her hair in a twist and covered it with a gauze veil sewn with emerald chips.

Though anxiety flooded her entire body, making her heart race and her legs quiver, Gilana carried herself with the calm dignity commanded by her station.

Only a short time ago, a message from Tabor had arrived in her chamber. The king wrote that in accordance with their "barbaric" ways, the Chrossmarriens had requested that their political discussion take place during the meal. It seemed they preferred to keep meetings "social."

A slight smile touched Gilana's lips as she approached the dining hall. At King Destin's request, Tabor's advisors as well as ambassadors from Minor Ives would be present tonight. Representatives from all three kingdoms would bear witness to Jehf and Gilana's accusation against Tabor. For the first time, Gilana didn't care. Regardless of whether or not she was banished, her son would be safe.

Two servants opened the double doors leading to the hall and Gilana stepped inside. The normally bustling room was empty, except for the small group seated at the king's table. Looking preoccupied, Tabor lounged at the head of the table, his elbow propped on the arm of his chair, his chin resting on his palm. Draped in his usual white, the soothsayer sat to Tabor's right side. Gilana thought she noted the slightest half smile

on his lips, but it faded so quickly that she might have been mistaken. King Destin and Jehf sat across from each other, each looking relaxed in spite of the accusations they were about to level on Tabor. Several representatives from Julius and Minor Ives sat chatting and sipping wine.

At Gilana's approach, everyone at the table stood. Even Tabor climbed grudgingly to his feet. Gilana resisted the urge to laugh. It seemed her rude husband was making quite an effort to impress the Chrossmarriens.

Gilana's gaze met Jehf's intense one and her face flushed. His look alone stirred memories of the passion they had so recently shared. She could almost feel his kiss on her lips and in other places that made her tingle all over just from thinking about it.

Once the meal was served, Tabor glanced at Destin, interest burning in his gaze. "You said you wanted to discuss possible terms for alliance?"

"Yes. As you know, we of Chrossmarrie keep very much to ourselves, however I think we all might benefit from extending our horizons, so to speak."

Tabor offered a serpentine smile. "I agree. One can never have too many allies."

"Of course, we expect some terms to be met first."

"As we do. Our advisors will plan a conference to talk about the details," Tabor said.

"Yes, but since this dinner was arranged for just that purpose, I suggest that we don't waste any time in beginning the discussions."

Gilana's heart pounded as she pretended to eat her meal. She noticed that Jehf appeared to be doing the same while most others at the table ate and drank freely. Only the soothsayer didn't so much as pick up his fork or lift his glass, though his behavior wasn't unusual. In two years Gilana had never seen him dine at the king's table, though he was almost always present for important meals.

Tabor finished chewing a chunk of rare meat, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and forced a smile in Destin's direction. "Of course. My advisors as well as my soothsayer are present."

"Soothsayer." Jehf's gaze switched to the white-cloaked man. "It's rare to see one

of your kind serving outside of your homeland.”

Tabor waved his hand. “He’s devoted to me, but not very talkative.”

“So if I ask, you won’t tell me the reason for such devotion to Julius?” A smile flirted with Jehf’s lips, but it didn’t reach his eyes. For a long moment, he and the soothsayer stared at one another before one of Tabor’s advisors interrupted with a question regarding the alliance.

For the remainder of the meal, they discussed the expected issues revolving around an alliance. Just before dessert was served, Destin delivered the blow.

“The final and most important term of our possible alliance is the return of my Chief Advisor’s woman and child.”

Several of the representatives paused, their forks and wineglasses halfway to their lips. Tabor choked on an apple slice.

His squinty eyes narrowed even more in Destin’s direction. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You know exactly what he means,” Jehf stated. “Queen Gilana is the mother of my son, Talon.”

A collective gasp swept across the table. Only Gilana, Jehf, Destin, and the soothsayer appeared collected.

“This is an outrageous accusation! How dare you suggest that my queen has betrayed me!”

“I’m not suggesting that she betrayed you. Quite the opposite.” Jehf spoke calmly, yet his gaze spat fire at his half brother. “I am stating to everyone present that two years ago, you forced me to impersonate you so that I could make love with Queen Gilana and get her with child because you are unable to make love to a woman yourself. I am stating that you gave orders that I was to be disposed of once you learned that Gilana was carrying my child whom you planned to make your heir.”

“Well, if I did order you disposed of, I didn’t do a very good job of it, did I?” Tabor’s glare shifted from Jehf to the soothsayer who wore his most unreadable expression. Next, he turned to Destin. “I don’t know what you can possibly hope to

gain from such preposterous accusations, but I want you out of my land immediately. I no longer wish an alliance with Chrossmarrie."

The ambassador from Minor Ives said, "Regardless of whether or not an alliance is formed, an accusation has been made. What has Queen Gilana to say about it?"

Tabor stared at Gilana. "Tell them it is an outrageous lie."

"It is not a lie," Gilana said. "It is the truth."

"Enough!" One of Tabor's ambassadors jumped to his feet. "Without a proper trial, there will be no further discussion."

"I must send a message to my queen," the ambassador from Minor Ives stated. "In the meantime, I suggest that Queen Gilana and her child return to Minor Ives with me until the trial."

"My son is going nowhere!" Tabor roared.

"And I am not leaving without him," Gilana snapped.

Jehf stood. "And I'm going nowhere without either of them."

For a moment, the entire table fell silent as Jehf and Tabor glared at each other with utter hatred.

* * *

After a heated discussion, it was decided that, until the trial date was set, Gilana, Jehf, and the young prince would remain at the palace in Julius. To avoid foul play against any of the accused, guards from Julius, Minor Ives, and Chrossmarrie would be posted outside each of their chambers. Destin also hinted that any harm befalling the accused, including deaths or injuries that seemed purely accidental or natural, would be investigated. This was said with a pointed look toward the soothsayer. While the emerald-eyed demon appeared unaffected by Destin's insinuation, Tabor's expression tightened with rage. Still, he realized that inciting an argument over the king of Chrossmarrie's statement would only cast him in a guilty light. Inside, Jehf rejoiced over his half brother's repressed fury.

Once again a prisoner in Tabor's dreaded castle, Jehf spent the first night pacing his chamber. Though his accommodations outshone those of his last visit to the palace,

he found no comfort in the plush guest room. No matter how soft the bed or expensive the draperies, it was nothing more than a cell.

Worst of all was knowing that Gilana and his son were imprisoned within the same walls and he was forbidden to see either of them until the trial. He longed to know the child he had not yet set eyes on and to hold the woman he loved.

A tap on the door distracted him from his thoughts. "Enter."

Tabor, his squinty eyes gleaming with hatred, burst inside, followed by one of Destin's guards.

"Leave us!" Tabor roared at his chaperone.

"By agreement of the three kingdoms, I must stay," the guard replied.

Tabor's jaw tensed visibly. "Fine."

Jehf wanted nothing more than to reach out and snap Tabor's neck. His rage had built for two years and even he hadn't realized how desperate he was to vent it.

"What do you want?" Jehf growled.

"I want you to retract your ridiculous accusations."

Jehf laughed without a trace of humor. "I'm sure you do."

"You're a fool. This is a trial you cannot win. You have no evidence."

"The queen herself admitted the truth."

A sly look crept into Tabor's eyes. "The queen is known for sinking into fits of melancholy. When she's in such a state, she will say and do just about anything."

"And I'm sure you have members of your household willing to swear to that?"

"Of course. Everyone in the palace is loyal to me and Queen Gilana. Take my suggestion, Chief Advisor. Withdraw your accusations and return to Chrossmarrie while you still can."

A genuine smile tugged at Jehf's lips as he exchanged glances with the guard. "Are you threatening me, King Tabor?"

"No. I'm just informing you of the punishment that awaits you after the trial. Once you are deemed a liar, you will be tortured and killed publicly."

"Even if I do lose, such a punishment could cause war between our kingdoms."

“Would your king risk war for personal vengeance?”

“I don’t know, as I’m not of pure royal blood. You tell me, King Tabor. How many lives is a monarch willing to destroy to satisfy his personal desires?”

For a moment, the half brothers locked gazes. Then Tabor stomped out of the chamber, leaving Jehf with the bittersweet taste of his first minor victory in the war he waged.

Chapter Eight

The trial was held in the High Court in Julius's capital city. The tall building of black stone seemed more ominous than usual as Gilana glanced out her carriage window on the morning of the trial. On her lap, prince Talon smiled and she forced herself to return the gesture.

Though she hated the thought of Talon spending the day in such a hellish place, the law demanded that the boy be nearby when the sentence was passed.

Gilana sat on the stone bench outside the courtroom, Talon in her arms. Just before the trial began, Jehf stepped through the door, Destin beside him. He held her gaze for a long moment before glancing at his son. Knowing this was the first time he had ever seen Talon saddened Gilana. This cold hall was not the place for a father to meet his child. Jehf should have been present at his birth. He should have been helping her raise the boy.

A guard stepped out of the courtroom. "Enter, please."

Gilana kissed Talon's cheek, then handed him to the soothsayer, meeting his gaze, hoping to read something there. When he was called before the judges, whose side would he take? Both Jehf and Destin had assured her that no matter what the outcome of the trial, Talon would be well cared for. The judges would never sentence the child to death, but his parents' lives were at risk. Should she be found guilty, the best Gilana could hope for would be exile. If Jehf was found guilty, she had no doubt that Tabor would insist upon execution. Hopefully the judges would realize that putting Jehf to death could mean war between their lands and Chrossmarrie. She shuddered to consider the other punishments that might be dealt. Some were probably worse than death.

Gilana watched as the soothsayer, along with Rozamond, turned and

disappeared into the room provided for them to await the end of the trial. Accompanied by Zohra, one of her mother's most favored advisors, she stepped into the courtroom.

"How are you?" Zohra whispered close to Gilana's ear.

"Worried."

"If you had come to us when you first learned of Tabor's deception, we would be able to build a better case."

Gilana cast the advisor a look of scarcely controlled fury. "Much easier said than done."

"No matter what the outcome, this trial will cause the people to lose faith in your leadership."

"Part of the reason I held my tongue was to avoid making my people suffer for personal issues between Tabor and myself."

The advisor held her gaze. "I know. Remember to say that when you're called for questioning."

Inside, two judges from each of the three kingdoms sat at a long stone table in the torch lit room. Several witnesses, including the queen of Minor Ives, sat in the cluster of high-backed chairs near the hearth. In the center of the chamber rested the witness stool, nothing more than a square slab of stone. Six cushioned stools, almost hidden in the shadows of the only unlit corner of the room, awaited the accused and their advisors.

Gilana and Zohra, both outwardly calm and collected, sat as Tabor and Jehf arrived with their advisors and took seats nearby.

The chiming of a bell signaled the beginning of the trial and the entire room fell silent.

Jehf was called first. He strode to the stool, his gaze fixed on the judges. Tabor's advisor, Marco, a tall man with a bloated face who possessed one of the most cunning minds in Julius, began the interrogation.

Jehf replied to each question with calm confidence. He related how he was plucked from his village and his family threatened unless he performed the sexual acts

ordered by Tabor. Once his task was complete, he was poisoned and sent to what should have been his death.

"An interesting story." Marco's pale green eyes stared hard at Jehf. "How often did you have relations of a carnal nature with Queen Gilana?"

"A little over week."

"Every night?"

"Yes."

Marco smiled slightly. "So I'm guessing you had no problems fulfilling the task?"

"I don't see what this has to --"

"Answer the question," stated one of the judges from Julius.

"I had no problem."

"Even though your life and the lives of your family were being threatened?" Marco lumbered closer to the stool, his wheeze audible in the nearly silent room.

"I don't see the point of these questions. If I want the queen and my child now, then surely she meant enough to me that I could easily make love with her, regardless of the circumstances."

"I'm sure." Marco's voice dripped sarcasm. "Your resemblance to King Tabor is remarkable. You managed to fool his wife and most of his servants. With your appearance, you could have entered the palace easily, sought out the queen, and made love with her."

Jehf's advisor, Percy, supplied by Destin, stood. "Dressed in the rags of a Cavern Dancer? That is unlikely."

"Finding decent clothes would be simple enough."

"Clothes fit for a king?"

"Look at him now." Marco gestured with his hand toward Jehf's fine attire.

"My position has changed significantly since then," Jehf said.

"For all we know, you have had connections with Chrossmarrie all along."

Gilana tensed, disgusted by Julius's feeble attempts at twisting their story.

In addition to fighting Tabor and his advisors, she also had her mother's wrath to contend with. The queen of Minor Ives had been furious when she learned what happened. Unfortunately, most of that fury was directed at Gilana. Her mother's harsh words still rang in her ears.

No matter what the cost, your first priority should be to keep peace between our lands. Love is for peasants and children. If Minor Ives is forfeited to Tabor because of this trial and I'm forced to break the marriage treaty by refusing to relinquish our land to Julius, it will be your fault. You never did have the stomach for leadership, Gilana. I am deeply ashamed of you.

Jehf's sharp reply to the interrogator forced her back to the present. "Then why would I live in a hovel on the coast of Julius?"

"You would have us believe that after living in Chrossmarrie for a mere two years you have been promoted to the position of Chief Advisor? And what of the mother and sister you claim to be protecting? All three kingdoms have launched an investigation, yet no matter how carefully your village was searched and the people questioned, there is no evidence that you had a family there."

"I wonder how that happened?" Jehf glared at Tabor who wore an innocent expression. "The people here are frightened of their king and with good reason. I'm sure he could convince them to withhold any information he doesn't want disclosed."

"So again you're accusing King Tabor without proof?"

"Interjection," said Percy, using the accepted manner of interruption during a trial. "May I speak?" The judges nodded and Percy approached the table. "I agree that during our initial investigation there was no record of Jehf's family in the village of Gull Cove. However one of my associates has uncovered information that conflicts with the statements from the people of Gull Cove."

The judges exchanged glances and motioned for him to continue.

"Jehf was drafted into Julius's army during their war with the kingdom of Sun Isle. During a battle, he was taken, for a short time, as a prisoner. A message was sent from a soldier of Sun Isle to Jehf's mother and sister who resided in Gull Cove. I have here a signed statement from an official representative of Sun Isle stating the contents of

the message and that it was delivered to his mother and sister."

"That means nothing!" Marco roared. "Sun Isle would do anything to discredit Tabor."

"I thought the relations between you are now peaceful?" Percy met his gaze.

"They are, but --"

"Yes?" he pressed. "You wish to accuse them of falsifying records? It seems we might be in for a string of trials. That is all." He bowed to the judges and returned to his seat.

Gilana was called next. As they passed each other, her gaze met Jehf's. His eyes revealed the love he felt, and somehow she knew that no matter what happened, he was worth the risk she had taken.

* * *

By the end of her questioning, Gilana's emotions were bubbling beneath her calm façade. The advisors twisted her words to suit their cases. Marco of Julius painted her as a madwoman. According to Tabor and several members of his household, she was given to mood swings and lies. Out of kindness, Tabor allowed her to visit with her son but had been forced to make his soothsayer the boy's protector.

When Rozamond was called to speak on Gilana's behalf, the woman was found in drunken stupor. Gilana didn't doubt that Tabor had a hand in her condition, most likely through the soothsayer who had been alone with the maid. Realizing that the emerald-eyed demon was probably still loyal to Tabor, she knew there was little hope of winning their case. With his mysterious powers, he would surely sway everyone in the courtroom, perhaps Gilana and Jehf themselves.

No. Her fears were getting the better of her. It wasn't as if the soothsayer was a god.

"As you can see, we have no desire to blame or shame Queen Gilana," Marco continued with false compassion. "Though I'm sure there is no doubt in anyone's mind that she and Chief Advisor Jehf had relations, it was due to a deception on his part. Also, since it is apparent that she slept with both men and the king's soothsayer agrees

that Talon is the rightful Prince of Julius, there is no doubt to the boy's paternity."

Slept with both men? That outrageous lie infuriated Gilana.

"For the record, we require that the soothsayer be questioned," said one of the judges from Minor Ives.

"I must object to calling the soothsayer," Zohra said. "It is known that he is somehow bound to King Tabor and cannot be trusted."

"The rules that apply to humanity do not affect his noble race," said one of the judges from Julius. "Surely you are not suggesting that he would lie before this court?"

"Anyone is capable of lying. Even a soothsayer."

Murmurs spread throughout the room at Zohra's words. The soothsayer was of a feared and respected people. To even insinuate that one of his kind might be under the control of a mere human, even a king, was inconceivable. Even Zohra hadn't quite believed Gilana's accusations when they had been preparing for the trial. Still, Gilana knew in her heart that somehow Tabor commanded the soothsayer's words and actions.

"He is an intimate member of the king's household and without his presence, this trial is a farce," stated a judge of Chrossmarrie. "Bring forth the soothsayer."

The guard at the entrance opened the door and called forth the soothsayer. From across the room, Gilana noted that he was paler than usual, his complexion nearly as white as his robe. Even his lips appeared bloodless. Drawing a deep breath, she exchanged glances with Jehf and saw her concern reflected back at her. Had Tabor somehow poisoned the soothsayer as well? Had he threatened or harmed him in some way that would force him to continue the lie they had upheld for the past two years?

Slowly, yet with his customary dignity, the soothsayer crossed the room and took his place on the stool. His eyes seemed darker than usual in his waxy face and they possessed a dull look, like a man recovering from severe illness or injury.

Gilana swallowed hard, knowing that within a few short hours the court would pronounce her a madwoman and Jehf a criminal. Her son would be taken from her. Already her mind whirled with plans of how to escape with Talon. She knew by the expression in Jehf's eyes that his thoughts were running the same course.

Marco approached the soothsayer. "State your name, please."

"Vlas Sascha Evgenyl."

"How long have you been in King Tabor's service?"

"Sixteen years."

"You are a soothsayer?"

"I am what your kind call a soothsayer."

"Explain what you mean by *our kind*."

"Humans."

"It's unusual for a soothsayer to live among humans, let alone serve a human ruler, yet you consider yourself loyal to King Tabor?"

"I am loyal."

Gilana's heart sank to her shoes. This day was quickly becoming a disaster.

Zohra rose from her chair. "Interjection. Would you tell us why a soothsayer is loyal to King Tabor?"

"A valid question." One of the judges of Minor Ives glanced in Vlas's direction. "Answer it."

"I owe King Tabor my life."

Marco couldn't keep the grin from his face. "I see. So you would do nothing to intentionally harm the king?"

"Would you lie to suit him?" Zohra interrupted.

"Be seated," a judge of Minor Ives snapped at Zohra. "Ignore protocol again during another advisor's interrogation, and you will be dismissed from this trial."

"We'll get directly to the point," Marco stated. "Soothsayer, whose child is Prince Talon?"

"He is Queen Gilana's son."

The judges' annoyance shone on their faces and Marco frowned. "That has been established. Who is the boy's father?"

"King Tabor feeds and clothes him. He has named him as his heir."

"Interjection," Percy stood, "that doesn't answer the question."

"Specifically, who created this child?" Marco asked.

"He is the creation of King Tabor, Queen Gilana, and Chief Advisor Jehf who is King Tabor's half brother."

A collective gasp swept through the room. Gilana's heart pounded. By all the gods, he was going to tell the truth.

Marco chuckled nervously. "Three parents?"

"Explain yourself," demanded a judge of Chrossmarrie.

"King Tabor wanted an heir, yet he is unable to produce one. He sent for his half brother, Jehf, a Cavern Dancer from Gull Cove. He ordered him to get the queen with child, lest his mother and sister be killed. Jehf fulfilled his task and is the blood father of Talon."

Tabor's face drained of color and his gaze spat fury at the soothsayer. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No, just my soul," the soothsayer said in a calm yet deadly tone, staring deeply into Tabor's eyes.

"Then, if this deception occurred, where are Jehf's mother and sister?" Zohra asked. The judges must have been as curious as she was, since no motion was made to punish her for yet another outburst without formal interruption.

"They were killed by King Tabor on the day Jehf was taken to the castle to begin the charade. The villagers were threatened with death, should they speak about the family to anyone. In addition to threats, to ensure that they kept their silence, he asked me to use my powers to cloud their memories regarding Jehf and his family."

"He's lying," Tabor shouted above the murmurs sweeping throughout the room.

The judges called for silence. Gilana and Jehf glanced at each other. A half smile flirted with his lips. His gaze riveted to Percy who stood and said, "Interjection. Why would King Tabor require another man to get the queen with child?"

"Because he is unable to perform the task himself," the soothsayer stated.

Again the crowd gasped.

"Are you saying he cannot or will not have sexual relations with a woman?"

"I'm saying he cannot have sexual relations with anyone. Many times over the years he has called upon my skills as a healer to try to rectify the problem, but alas it is insurmountable."

Tabor's face turned from white to scarlet and back to white again. "That is not true. I don't know why this loyal servant of mine has chosen to lie, but --"

"I am not lying, however if you don't believe me, it would be simple enough to test the king's abilities, or lack thereof."

More gasps and laughter from the crowd forced all six judges to bellow for silence.

The soothsayer continued, "Queen Gilana is sane. Her rare bouts of melancholy can be explained by the fact that she has been forced to live a lie to protect her son. Tabor has made threats not only to her, but to thousands of others over the years for various reasons. He deceived not only Gilana, but Julius and Minor Ives as well. A man who would force his brother to sleep with his unsuspecting wife, then order him to be done away with after murdering his family is not the sort of man worthy to wear the crown."

For the next hour, more questions were fired at the soothsayer. Gilana and Jehf were interrogated again. Finally, the judges voted, all but one finding Tabor guilty of treason. In accordance with the marriage treaty, Gilana took possession of Julius, making Talon her legal heir. Tabor was stripped of his title and exiled.

As the guards escorted him out, Tabor paused in front of the soothsayer. "Your betrayal has sealed your fate. You will die today."

"I've never betrayed you. I've upheld your command."

"My command?" Tabor snarled. "Your duty has always been to protect me."

"Until the night the prince was born. Do you recall your order?"

Tabor's brow furrowed as reality struck him. "I was drunk! My brain was muddled. Surely you can't --"

"Come." A guard grasped Tabor's elbow and led him away from the soothsayer.

As he passed Gilana and Jehf, Tabor glanced at them, a frightening smile spread

across his face. At one time, such an expression would have worried Gilana, since she knew it usually accompanied a destructive fit of temper from the former king. Whenever he smiled in such a way, somebody was certain to suffer.

Not anymore, she told herself. He has no power left.

Suddenly a scream erupted from the hall. Gilana recognized Rozamond's voice and sheer terror gripped her.

"Talon!" she shouted and raced out of the room, Jehf at her heels.

In the corridor outside of the room where Talon waited, soldiers from Minor Ives and Chrossmarrie battled a group of Tabor's personal guards. Rozamond's screams echoed from inside the room, and Gilana caught a glimpse of more armed men inside.

"Talon!" she screamed, racing for the door. Amidst the scuffle, she was shoved aside and struck her head on the doorjamb. Dizzy, she crawled inside, not caring that booted feet stepped on her fingers. Glancing up, she saw that Jehf had grasped a sword from one of the fallen guards and was fighting his way into the room.

He parried and thrust like a madman. Within moments, he had cleared Tabor's men away from his son.

"By the gods," Jehf gasped, helping Gilana to her feet as both of them stared at the eerie scene in the center of the room. Prince Talon lay sleeping on a chair within a triangle gouged into the floor, the crevices filled with blood.

Trembling, Rozamond staggered toward Gilana, her eyes still glazed from her earlier stupor. "The guards tried to attack him, but they couldn't breach the triangle."

"Where did it come from?"

"The soothsayer," one of the guards panted from where he sat on the floor, blood dripping from several wounds inflicted by Jehf during their fight. "He told us Tabor ordered the ritual."

"And I suppose Tabor ordered you to attack the prince?" Jehf snapped, placing the tip of his blade beneath the guard's chin. The man nodded slowly. "I should cut your throat now and be done with it."

"It's some kind of magical shield," Gilana murmured, gazing from the triangle to

her son. "It protected him." Tentatively, she stepped closer to Talon.

"Gilana, be careful!" Jehf reached for her, but she had already stepped across the triangle's side and picked up Talon who cuddled against her shoulder, still deeply asleep.

Jehf approached, kissing Gilana's cheek while stroking Talon's hair.

The slightest smile touched her lips. "Jehf, this is Talon. Your son."

"He's perfect, Gilana. Just like his mother." Tenderly, he brushed her lips with a kiss before his expression hardened. Straightening, he turned and stalked out of the room, his grip so tight on the sword that his knuckles turned white. "Tabor is the one who needs protection now."

"Jehf, wait!" Gilana hurried after him.

* * *

Jehf's heart throbbed with rage as he strode into the courtroom where Tabor waited, two guards nearby. The judges and several onlookers still waited for a report of the situation in the hall. The soothsayer was still seated, though with a quick look, Jehf guessed it was because the man was too ill to depart.

"You paid those guards to kill my son!" Jehf snarled, approaching Tabor, his blade poised for attack.

The guards drew their weapons and stepped between the fallen king and the Chief Advisor.

"You deserve to die for so many reasons." Jehf's chest rose and fell with each enraged breath. Gods, he ached to slaughter this bastard who had killed his mother and sister and had tried to destroy his son, as well. "If Talon had been injured, I would kill you now, no matter what the consequences!"

Tabor's lip curled. "He's not dead?"

"Not while protected by the soothsayer's ritual."

"You bastard!" Tabor stood, glaring at the soothsayer. "I don't know how you were able to warp fate itself, but your soul is still mine and I will claim it now!"

Tabor lunged at the soothsayer, his hands wrapping around his neck. The

soothsayer's weakened state prevented him from avoiding Tabor's twisting fingers. Jehf expected the soothsayer's rings to sear Tabor's flesh, but whatever power the former king still had over him apparently warded off the rings' magic. As they struggled, the sleeves of Vlas's white robe turned scarlet with blood.

The guards and Jehf rushed toward the two men. Jehf reached them first and easily broke Tabor's grip. He hurled him onto the floor.

With an animalistic roar of pure hatred, Tabor tugged a dagger from his boot and sprang at Jehf.

Gasps echoed throughout the room as Jehf's sword pierced Tabor's heart and the former king wailed in agony. The half brothers' gazes locked before Tabor sank to the floor and died.

Panting, Jehf turned to Gilana who knelt beside the soothsayer, examining his injuries.

"My gods, his wrists have been cut," she said.

Jehf squatted beside her, noting that the soothsayer's wrists had indeed been stitched and bandaged recently. He held the man's ink black gaze. "It was your blood in the triangle, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Vlas's voice was scarcely a whisper.

Jehf tore the hem of his shirt, binding the soothsayer's wrists tightly.

"Send for a healer. Quickly!" Gilana shouted over her shoulder, then turned back to the soothsayer. "You saved Talon. For that we owe you everything."

"On the contrary. I owe the three of you more than you realize."

"I don't understand."

"Gilana, after his injuries are cared for and he's rested, we'll talk with him more," Jehf said. "I think you have much explaining to do, soothsayer."

A healer arrived and Jehf stepped aside, drawing Gilana and Talon into the circle of his arms. For several long, wonderful moments, he held them without saying a word.

Finally, Jehf began guiding his family out of the courtroom, but the soothsayer called to them before they reached the door.

"I must speak with you both."

"It can wait," said the healer. "As soon as I'm finished applying the bandages, you must rest."

The soothsayer's gaze fixed on the healer who visibly cringed. "Thank you for the advice. I will rest after I have spoken with them."

The healer completed his task and left the room quickly, as if anxious to be rid of Vlas. Jehf couldn't blame him. The soothsayer wasn't the sort of man who inspired warm feelings.

"Why is he still sleeping?" Gilana glanced at her son resting against her shoulder.

"I gave him something to relax him so that he wouldn't leave the triangle," the soothsayer said. "He'll wake within the hour. I slipped a bit of the same into Rozamond's tea so that she wouldn't interfere. That woman always watched me like I was going to kill the boy at any given moment."

At least that explained why Rozamond had appeared too drunk to undergo the interrogation.

"I wonder why she didn't trust you?" Jehf's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"If the triangle protected Talon, then why was I able to breach it?" Gilana asked.

"Because it would only keep away those who meant to harm the boy."

Jehf slipped his son from Gilana's arms. "He's quite big. I'll take him for a while."

A warm feeling spread through him as the boy settled against his shoulder. This was his son. A smile tugged at his lips.

Gilana gazed at both of them. "He looks so much like you, Jehf."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to talk."

Both of them turned to the soothsayer. Jehf admitted the man looked on the verge of collapse. By the amount of blood in the triangle, he wondered how he was still alive. Still, like Cavern Dancers, soothsayers possessed greater physical strength than humans.

"I must get to Tabor's chamber immediately. He has something that belongs to me."

"Before we do anything, I want to know exactly what part you played in this deception and why," Jehf demanded.

"That seems fair enough. Because of a ritual which you probably wouldn't understand, I was bound to Tabor and forced to do his will."

"How is that possible?" Gilana asked. "Your power is greater than any mere human's, or even a Cavern Dancer's."

"It's a long story and I haven't much time."

Jehf folded his arms across his chest. "Then I suggest you start talking."

Sighing deeply, the soothsayer closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them, glancing from Jehf to Gilana. "Eighteen years ago, my younger brother was involved in a riding accident that should have killed him. He was found by a youth who stopped to raid his belongings -- not that he needed to steal anything, since he was Prince Tabor of Julius and already possessed more wealth than any man should need." The soothsayer's bitterness dripped from every word. "There is an ancient ritual that has long been forbidden among our kind. This ritual allows one of us to survive a fatal illness or injury through the sharing of our soul with another. Once this sharing occurs, we are bound to serve the one who holds that offered part of our soul. Unless the person dies or chooses to release us, we are like the living dead. Even if another illness or injury strikes, we cannot die, but remain locked in this world, feeling all the pain of impending death but unable to be released from it."

"I think I'd rather be dead the first time than give up my soul," Jehf murmured.

"As would I," Gilana said, pressing closer to Jehf and clutching his arm, as if the soothsayer's words chilled her to the heart.

"And you would be right," Vlas continued. "My brother was only seventeen and the reality of death seemed more frightening to him than living as a corpse-like slave. He begged Tabor to accept the ritual, telling him that he would forever control the powers of a soothsayer. Of course Tabor was unable to resist accepting such a weapon."

Two years after my brother gave up his soul to Tabor, he was involved in another accident. He sent for me, and when I arrived, he was bedridden and in constant agony. Because of the ritual, he was unable to die and could not be cured since the injuries were meant to cause death. Tabor was the only person who could release him, and he refused. My brother's power was still useful to him as a form of personal protection. Because of it, I could not kill him and release my brother's soul."

"I think I understand," Gilana murmured.

So did Jehf. Revulsion crept through him when he imagined the sort of life the soothsayer had endured these past years.

"I gave Tabor my soul in exchange for the release of my brother's and have served him ever since."

Pausing, Vlas closed his eyes for another moment, his face etched with exhaustion. Jehf almost felt sorry for him, but there were still many questions that needed answering.

"Then how were you able to speak against him at the trial? And why did you allow him to die by Jehf's blade, if your powers somehow protected him?" Gilana asked.

"On the night of Talon's birth, Tabor was nervous. He feared losing the heir he had procured through his deception. He asked for a drink to calm him, and I provided one that was strong enough to muddle his thoughts. Then it was simple to convince him that the one way to secure his safety for the rest of his life would be to ensure that his heir would never lose the throne."

"That's when he commanded you to protect Talon and ensure that he inherit the throne," Gilana murmured.

"By the law of the ritual, once a command is given to the soothsayer, it can never be revoked and supercedes all previous orders. I had been under order to protect Tabor, but the ritual terms demand that my power only be used to protect one person at a time. When Tabor ordered me to keep Talon safe, my protective shield transferred to the boy."

"Then Tabor has been without magical protection for the past two years?" Gilana was aghast. "Why didn't you kill him yourself, if you hate him as much as you claim?"

"The terms of service following the ritual are very specific. Fortunately for us, Tabor was ignorant of most of them. Still, you know how strong his instincts for self-preservation were. One of the first commands he ever gave me was that I never cause him physical harm or incite others to do so. His orders regarding Talon didn't alter that, so I could not provoke attacks against him or destroy him myself. However, since Jehf needed no prompting from anyone to kill him tonight and my powers are still protecting Talon, our former king was vulnerable."

"What would happen if you just ignored the laws of the ritual?" Gilana asked.

"Without going into detail, let's just say I was physically unable to rebel. I would freeze like a statue of ice while experiencing unimaginable pain."

"So you used us to free yourself," Jehf muttered, unsure if he was impressed by the soothsayer's patience and cleverness or furious because the man had used those he loved for his own end. "How could you be sure your plan would work?"

"It took me fourteen years to catch a glimpse of hope for my release. When I met the both of you, I knew it would be my one chance to escape. You know a bit about my powers. I saw this scenario as a possible future."

"Tell me, was there a future where my mother and sister lived?" Jehf demanded. "Did you know that they would be killed but allowed Tabor to do what he wanted to suit yourself?"

"I didn't know that your family was killed until several days after it happened."

"And if you had known?"

Vlas's fathomless gaze met Jehf's. "Then I probably would have gone on with my plan anyway."

His teeth grinding, Jehf stepped toward the soothsayer. "You're as manipulative a bastard as Tabor ever was."

"Perhaps."

"You gave up your soul by choice, soothsayer. Gilana, Talon, and I had no

choice.”

“I could never have swayed Tabor from his plan regarding the three of you,” Vlas stated. “And remember, Cavern Dancer, when he ordered you done away with, I could have taken his command in the literal sense instead of interpreting it in a manner that kept you alive.”

“Not if you wanted your soul freed you couldn’t!”

The two men glared at one another before a slight, humorless smile touched the soothsayer’s lips. Jehf knew he had won the point.

“Regardless of his reasons, he did ensure our son’s safety. If not for him, Tabor would have still followed through with his plan and we would not be a family.”

Gilana’s words seemed to drain most of Jehf’s anger. It was true that Vlas had used his very blood to save Talon. That was a favor which could not easily be repaid, no matter what the man’s motives.

“My time is short and I must retrieve my soul immediately.”

Jehf glanced at the soothsayer’s bandaged wrists. “Are you going to die?”

“No. I stopped the bleeding in time. I just don’t have much strength left and if I do not reclaim my soul within the same day that it is released, I will continue to walk as the living dead forever. I don’t relish the thought of it.”

Gilana took her son from Jehf so that he could help Vlas to the carriage outside. Together, they rode to the castle and ascended the steps to Tabor’s chamber.

“That’s it.” Vlas walked slowly to a shelf on which a black bottle rested. “Since the ritual, I have been unable to touch it. Now that Tabor is dead... leave me please. It should only take a moment.”

“What if you still can’t touch it? Or what if something goes wrong?” Gilana asked.

“If I can’t touch it, then nothing will be any different for me than it is now. If something goes wrong, then I ask that you cremate me.”

“Comforting,” Jehf muttered.

“Then you care about the outcome, Cavern Dancer?” Vlas sounded skeptical.

Oddly enough, Jehf found that he did care. Slowly, he and Gilana turned and left the chamber.

A moment later came the sound of breaking glass, then a sharp cry from the soothsayer.

More time passed, and Jehf stepped toward the door. No sooner had he reached it than it opened and the soothsayer stepped out, his eyes unnaturally bright in his gaunt face.

"Are you all right?" Gilana asked.

He nodded, his steps painfully slow as he made his way to his chamber.

A servant approached, her nervous gaze switching from Jehf to Gilana. "Forgive the interruption, my queen, but your mother and the judges wish to speak with you back at the High Court. Now that you have taken the throne, affairs must be placed in order. Chief Advisor, your king also requests your presence."

"Of course." Jehf nodded. He turned to Gilana and offered her a tender smile, noting that she looked as emotionally drained as he felt. He wished their little family could be alone together, but that would not be possible, at least until later.

Gilana dismissed the servant, then slipped her hand into Jehf's and squeezed it. "Jehf, I..."

"Yes?"

"If not for your presence, this entire day would have been unbearable."

Tenderly, he cupped her face in his hand and gazed into her eyes with all the affection he felt. "I'm sure that's not true. You're the strongest woman I know, Gilana, and you will make a wonderful ruler for Julius. Just as you've been an excellent mother to Talon."

"All my life I've been trained to rule a kingdom, but parenting a child is something I would prefer to share with his father. I realize that you are obligated to return to Chrossmarrie with Destin, but I would ask you to consider remaining here."

"In what capacity?"

"As Talon's father, of course, and..."

Jehf's heartbeat quickened and he held Gilana's gaze while tenderly stroking her face with his fingertips.

"And as my consort."

He chuckled. "You're proposing marriage?"

"Yes." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his lips. "I don't expect an immediate answer. Tonight will be soon enough."

This time, Jehf did laugh. "I hope Rozamond is sufficiently recovered to sit with Talon this evening. You and I will have an engagement to celebrate and I intend to make the night very, very memorable."

Chapter Nine

Late that night, Gilana and Jehf finally retired to their chamber, after checking on Talon.

"I thought the meetings would never end, and the coming weeks will be full of them as well," Gilana said, leaning heavily against Jehf's chest as he held her close. Julius's advisors and judges didn't contest Gilana's leadership, since few people in their land respected Tabor and were more than ready to take their chances with a new bloodline in the palace. The common people detested their former king so much that they actually celebrated his death.

"Destin took the news of my leaving Chrossmarrie rather well."

"As if he didn't expect it."

A smile flirted with Jehf's lips. "It's true he is nearly as manipulative as Tabor and the soothsayer, especially when it came to helping us in our cause. He's a good friend."

"And will make a wonderful ally for Julius and Minor Ives."

Cupping her chin in his hand, Jehf tilted her face toward his and spoke against her lips. "There's another alliance I'm looking forward to."

Gilana gazed at him with her most flirtatious look. "Shall we begin discussing terms right now?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Jehf swept her into his arms and placed her on the bed.

"Gilana," Jehf murmured against her lips, "finally you're mine."

"I should have known from the first moment we met that you and Tabor were not one and the same." Taking his face in her hands, she kissed his brow, then his lips. With her eyes tightly closed, she savored the taste and feel of him. Warmth seemed to

spread from his body to hers.

He grasped her hands and kissed them, then sucked one of her pinky fingers into his mouth. His tongue gently teased the tip of the digit before he drew more firmly upon it.

Gilana sighed with contentment and desire. Jehf, this man who had haunted her thoughts and dreams, was hers at last.

Unable to wait another moment, she began tugging at his clothes. She fumbled with his buttons, clumsy in her need to feel him deep inside her. Chuckling, he stood and shed his clothes while she gazed at him.

The sight of his lean, chiseled body inspired her to lick her lips. Each time she looked at him felt almost like the first. Her belly clenched and her heart pounded. Without the need of a touch, her nipples sprang to life, tightening and tingling. The dampness between her legs signaled that she was more than ready for him, yet she knew that Jehf was not one to hurry lovemaking. His life as a Cavern Dancer had made him a master of control over his body.

Tearing her gaze from him, Gilana began undressing. While she removed her dress and shift, Jehf tugged off her shoes. As he rolled off her stockings, he kissed each of her legs from thigh to ankle. Finally, he stretched out beside her naked body and gazed into her eyes. With the utmost tenderness, he stroked wisps of hair from her face. His gentle kisses fluttered across her eyelids, coaxing a smile from her lips.

"My love, we have so much time to make up for," he said.

"Don't think about the past, Jehf. You, me, and Talon are a family now. That's all that matters. I'm only sorry that you had to lose so much for us to be together. Your mother and sister, your home --"

"My home is with you." He covered her mouth in a breath-stealing kiss.

Gilana moaned with pleasure as his hand swept from her breast to her hip. His long fingers parted her thighs and sifted through the hair covering her soft mound. One of his fingertips dipped into her pussy and emerged slick with her juices. That teasing finger stroked up and down her clit in time with the thrusting of his tongue in her

mouth.

Gilana finally trapped his tongue and began sucking on it. His savage groan indicated how much he enjoyed her teasing actions.

Covering her clit with his palm, he slipped two fingers inside her. While his hand stirred her clit, his fingers explored her wet pussy that ached for his cock.

Gasping, Gilana broke their kiss.

"By the gods, I'm not a Cavern Dancer you know," she gasped, her heart racing. "I can't hold my breath that long."

"Then go ahead and breathe." He grinned, sliding down her body and covering her clit with his lips. At the first stroke of his tongue on her sensitive flesh, Gilana arched her neck and entangled her fingers in his hair. She held him close, nearly lost in sensation, though she made a conscious effort not to pull out his hair in her excitement. Each upward stroke of his hot, wet tongue stabbed her with pleasure-pain.

"Yes, oh, yes, Jehf!"

He stroked faster, hurling her into orgasm. Using the flat of his tongue, he met her pulse for pulse so that her climax seemed to last forever. With her eyes tightly closed, Gilana savored every moment of pleasure. She panted his name, completely happy and satisfied for the first time in two long years.

* * *

Once Jehf was certain he couldn't force another tremor from Gilana's limp body, he lifted his head and began kissing her belly. He closed his eyes and used his tongue to explore her navel.

The love he felt for her was like nothing he had ever experienced. He nearly smiled when he imagined the few times Destin had suggested that once Jehf won her, he might lose interest. The king had sworn to do everything in his power to see the lovers united again. Still, he had expressed his belief that for the past two years Jehf might have been loving a fantasy created by the human impulse to want what he couldn't have.

Poor Destin. In spite of his wealth and power, he had obviously never

experienced the greatest force of all. True love.

In reality, Jehf's fantasies about being reunited with Gilana paled when compared to the actual experience.

An adorable, contented sound escaped Gilana's throat. Jehf lifted his head and gazed at her, enchanted by the half smile on her lips and the sultry look in her eyes.

"Enjoyed that?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

Her fingers swept through the hair at his temples, then traced the shape of his face.

"Ready to enjoy more?"

As he bent his head to lick her again, she gently tugged on his shoulders. "Please, Jehf, I want to feel you inside me. Hold me. Fill me."

"But --"

"Please. Believe it or not, Cavern Dancer, there are times when it feels good to hurry lovemaking along."

"Like now?"

Her smile broadened. "Exactly like now."

Did she have any idea how much her words thrilled him? Though he loved savoring her body, he felt the mad urge to sate his lust like a Sea Ram during mating season.

He slid up her body and grasped her hands, using one of his to pin them above her head while his knee parted her thighs. The tip of his cock probed her slick pussy lips and his breath caught with anticipation.

Gazing at him with shining eyes, she thrust her hips upward as his cock swooped inside her. Her soft flesh enveloped him like wet velvet. Wrapping her smooth legs around him, she met him thrust for passionate thrust.

"Jehf, I love to feel your strength so deep inside me. Faster. Faster!"

The magnificent sensations breaking over his body stole his speech. All he managed were animalistic growls of raw passion. He licked the side of her neck and

gently worried her earlobe between his teeth. Their skin grew warm as he thrust faster and harder. The rasp of their mingling breaths filled the room and for several moments Jehf thought only of her. There were no kingdoms. No deceptions. Nothing except this beautiful woman clinging to him and panting close to his ear.

"Jehf," she cried, her tongue rolling over his shoulder and up his neck, sending little shivers of delight through his entire body. "Yes, my love. Oh!"

Several more short, fast thrusts and Jehf felt her convulse. Every pulsation of her hot, damp body around his cock pushed him closer to perfection. With a final massive thrust, Jehf's entire world exploded. Closing his eyes tightly, he surged into her, his heart pounding and body jerking in pleasure.

He lost track of how long they lay, their bodies so close that he could feel her heart beating against him. Finally, he lifted his head and stood.

She reached for him, disappointment in her eyes. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back."

Stooping, he picked up his coat and tugged a cloth pouch from the pocket. He returned to the bed and lay beside her. Drawing her close, he handed her the pouch. "This is for you."

She opened the ties and dropped the pouch's contents into her hand. A smile touched her lips as she studied the rainbow-colored stone cut into the shape of a heart and polished until it gleamed. A tiny hole was drilled into its top and threaded with a fine gold chain.

"It's lovely."

He took it from her and fastened it around her neck. "It's a Hell's Eye from the deepest dive I ever took."

A look of concern passed over her face. "That sounds dangerous."

Jehf nodded, recalling the dive. It had taken place several months after he saved Destin's life. The two had returned to the same cavern where they had narrowly escaped death. They discovered that the earthquake had created an even deeper cavern nearby. Both the king and Jehf had nearly drowned securing some of the finest Hell's

Eyes ever mined. Afterward they swore to abandon that particular cavern forever. Diving there was simply too risky.

"It was probably the hardest dive I ever experienced. That's why I want you to have this."

"I love it."

"I love you, Gilana." He kissed her hair and settled against the pillows, holding her as they drifted to sleep.

* * *

The following morning, Gilana and Jehf awakened to Rozamond pounding on their door and calling for them.

They leapt out of bed. Gilana reached for her robe while Jehf wrapped a sheet around his waist and flung open the door.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Is it Talon?" Gilana hurried to his side.

"No, the boy is fine, but the soothsayer is leaving. I thought you might want to know."

Gilana's brow furrowed. "Leaving? I'm sure he's not well enough to travel yet."

"He's at the stable now, so if you want to stop him, you'd better hurry."

Jehf closed the door and tugged on his trousers while Gilana slipped on her boots. Moments later, they rushed to the stable and arrived just as the soothsayer was leading his horse outside.

"Where are you going?" Gilana demanded.

"Home," he said.

"You can't travel after losing so much blood yesterday," Jehf stated. "Do you want to risk reopening the wounds while controlling your horse?"

"I'm fine. I've waited sixteen years to be free of this place. Good luck to both of you and Talon. You have a fine son."

"Won't you say goodbye to him?" Gilana said, for the first time realizing that she had come to think of the soothsayer as a friend. She knew Talon would miss him

greatly.

"I already have."

"We can't convince you to wait at least a few more days?" Jehf asked.

"No."

"Good luck to you, then." Jehf extended his hand and after a moment's hesitation, the soothsayer took it.

"By the way, I want to return this to you. You might need it." Jehf reached into his pocket and tugged out a compass.

The soothsayer took it, and though he didn't smile, an almost amused expression glistened in his eyes. He turned and mounted his horse.

"You will be missed," Gilana called.

Glancing over his shoulder, Vlas offered the slightest smile. Within moments, he'd disappeared through the palace gates.

"I wonder if we'll ever hear from him again?" Gilana asked, her hand caressing the Hell's Eye pendant at her throat. It pleased Jehf that she had worn the jewel all night.

Jehf slipped his arm around her and rested his cheek against her hair. "Difficult to say."

"There's something sad about him. I hope he finds peace."

"I'm sure he will, once he reaches his home. I know I have. My home is with you, my love. Now and always."

The End

Kate Hill

Kate Hill's fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not writing, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and spending time with her family. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>