

IDYLL OF A KING

by Sharon Reynolds

ANOTHER LIFE

Vincent sat at the octagon table in his chamber. Intently watching the horses of an old toy carousel go around. The room was filled with the tinkling lilting music, though time and much use had slowed the spring on it considerably. The candles next to it illuminated his features softly, casting red highlights into his long tawny hair.

Catherine smiled, observing him. "It's lovely," she said at last. Stepping in at his welcoming smile. "Where did you get it?"

Vincent lowered his head, looking down at the toy with much reverence. "It was... a gift." He watched her as she came closer. "From Devin," he admitted.

"It looks antique."

"Yes," Vincent agreed simply. His wonderful voice a mixture of velvet and gravel. A sand-edged baritone just this side of a whisper. Light sparkled in his sky blue eyes. Cocking his head to one side, he looked up at her. "What... brings you here? It must be quite late."

"You do," Catherine shrugged. "I had some work to do, but I couldn't keep my mind on it. I thought a quiet walk in the park might do us both some good."

His smile, full of long, sharp, canine teeth widened.

"What were you musing about just now?" she asked, watching him rise gracefully from his chair.

Vincent looked down at the toy once more. Pulling the cloak from the back of his seat, he quickly slipped into it with practiced ease, set it squarely on his broad shoulders and shrugged.

"Dreams."

Long ago, Catherine had decided that she would have loved Vincent no matter what he wore. Still, his taste in clothing, patched and resewn castoffs though they were, always reminded her of some romantic hero. *'Shakespeare's* Hamlet or perhaps Romeo. At the thought her face burned with a blush.

"Catherine?" Vincent questioned. Only her downcast green eyes answered him.

Titiena paced the floor of her hotel room. She had decided that the Presidential Suite was for Presidents, not women. A cool breeze from one of the open windows invited her to its sill. The moonlight glided silkenly over her dark skin. She stood there. Hands on the frame. A frown crossed her features.

How strange it was. To be so far from home. Yet, still to have the same bright moon overhead. The frown deepened.

She had been very honored to have her small state's affairs included in the International Conference of Trade held in New York. It had taken training at the finest schools in her country and much hard work to get into the position to which she now held. The title that went with it had made her own village very proud. But, the cars, the noise, the docks, nothing felt right. The stuffy meeting rooms. Political and social rhetoric. All of it had become increasingly tiresome. She longed to see the end of it, to be on the ship bound once again for home.

She sighed. Walking over to the closet, there she pulled out a light coat and slipped into it. Carefully buttoning it over her tribal talisman, a gold medallion she wore around her neck. There were only three copies of it that she knew of. Each passed down from mother to daughter over uncounted years. She had been in direct line of ancient chiefs.

She knew the stories of the Great Warrior by heart. Had practiced the rituals since childhood. She whispered the words of the ancient prayer, as she directed two of the five tribesman in her party to follow her. Trained in the art of jungle living, Titiena did not need their presence as bodyguards. Instead, she took comfort in their faces. Reminders of home and tradition.

Dressed in gray business suits, they followed her out of the hotel, beyond the street and into Central Park.

Brown leaves crunched underfoot as Catherine and Vincent emerged from the pipe junction tunnel and into the park. The air was crisp with the scent of earth and late summer's flowers. Water lapped softly at the bowl of Angel's Fountain as they passed by it.

His long elegant fingers curled one hand with hers. Catherine could find no greater happiness than at that moment. To be with him, alone. The pressure of his hand on hers. Its soft downy silken hair against her own skin. The warmth she felt. Both outside and from within.

She leaned further into Vincent's bulk. The dark wool of his cloak almost enfolding her. He accepted her movement without question, the smile widening on his cleft upper lip. Catherine felt secure. Vincent's arm around her shoulder.

Titiena took the wilder paths. The scent of late summer and the darkness filled her senses with freedom, so much preferable to the meeting room, or the hotel. Her guard walked two paces behind her, as was traditional for her standing. She had to suppress the laughter she felt well inside her every time she looked at them. Poor Runa and Taor. They looked so out of place in those clothes.

Absently, she pulled the talisman out of her coat and stood, fingering its raised image lovingly.

The park had become her refuge. A place to relax before facing another day of talks. She had been in New York for almost two weeks now, had found part of the park known as *'the Ramble'* to be that which she liked the most. Instructing her people to stay at the other end of the wide expanse, she moved into it like a gazelle. Wild. Free.

Titiena came to a stop shortly before the end of the trees. Where a lush curtain of green hid her from the more tended part of the park. Voices drifted on the night's breeze. Reaching before her she pulled away small branches enough to create a window to see through. Beyond her by several yards, sat two people on a stone bench. One a man, judging by size. He wore a black cloak with an oversized hood that hid almost all of his features. The woman next to him was slight built with brown shoulder

length hair.

The man's voice was like none she had ever heard before. Titiena found herself fascinated and frightened all at the same time. Curious, she leaned further into the bushes.

The hooded head came up sharply.

"Vincent?" Catherine questioned, alarmed. "What is it?"

"Someone... watching."

Catherine moved to look, but gentle pressure on her hand forbid her to.

"Do not look....," Vincent warned softly. "Let it pass."

Titiena's eyes grew wide. Her mouth dry as she caught a glimpse of the man's face. A silhouette. The hood had slipped back ever so slightly. A flash in her memory. It was only an instant but one that left her shaking with fear. It had not been the face of a man. It had been the silhouette of a lion!

"It... is gone," Vincent said after a heartbeat. There was a terrified look on Catherine's face. He felt her fear pulse through him.

"Did he see you?" her voice wavered.

He did not answer her. Instead, he stood and taking her hand gently in his. Led her up and away, back toward the junction tunnel and home.

Titiena pulled a glass of water to her lips in the bathroom of her suite. Never had she been so afraid. Her hands still shaking, she wasn't quite sure how she had ever come back from the park. Fighting the trembling, she stared at the gold medallion's reflection in the mirror. Its jeweled sky blue eyes seemed to look back at her.

Another day passed. The afternoon's filtered sunlight found Vincent sitting by the double waterfall Below. One arm propped up on one knee. An open book near the supporting elbow. There had been no classes for him to teach that day. The book he had selected, too, had not been interesting enough to lead him beyond the somber thoughts that troubled him.

"Vincent?" It was Father's voice.

Screaming over the roar of the falls. Father, an older man with graying hair and beard ambled into the cavern. Up the wide cliff walk and seated himself on the long stone ledge that served as a bench beside his son. "I thought you would be here," he continued, lowering his voice to where he could hear himself. He knew that Vincent's hearing was far and above his own and that further shouting was unnecessary. "Mary said you haven't had supper," his voice deepened in concern. "It....ah....isn't like you to miss a meal."

Vincent chuckled, turning to look at him. Father's cheeks still blushed by embarrassment. His son's look darkened. He made a long arm, laying it across Father's shoulders. His hand resting on the shoulder further from him.

"I... was just thinking," Vincent stated, a frown creasing the point between his heavy brows even deeper. "Thinking about.. .Dreams. Wishes... Fantasies."

Father forced a smile. "Are we talking literary works or reality?"

The blonde's gaze drifted out over the cliff. To the pounding waters beyond them.

"Father... Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like. To... have had another life... Been another person?"

Father's brow knit above his nose. How often had he dreaded the heading this conversation had taken. How many times had he spoken of such things to the small leonine child that sat at his knees, or avoided the troubled teenager with such encompassing questions. He sighed heavily as Vincent withdrew his arm. Placing both hands in his lap, head down. The long hair obscuring his face.

"I... suppose so." Father pushed on uncomfortably. "I have often wondered... what would have happened if the bureaucrats had listened to me." A pained look crossed his face. "If... I had been able to save... Devin's mother."

Sorrow filled Vincent's voice as he stood. "I... didn't mean to bring back... painful memories."

"It's all right, Vincent." The elder man tried to reassure. "We all ask ourselves that question at one time or another. There are not... any easy answers."

"And what... of me, Father?" Vincent's tone was bitter. His sky blue eyes narrowed in frustration. "What would I have been... Could I have been... without this face?"

Father's expression darkened. His gray blue eyes narrowed by some inner conflict. The words did not come easily. "I suppose you would be... just as you are, Vincent. A learned man with strong convictions. Why do you ask? Has something happened?... Between you and Catherine?"

"No," Vincent puzzled. "Something in the park last night."

"Last night?" Father echoed. "I thought you were with Catherine."

"I was... We were talking and... someone."

Father's brow clouded like the stirrings of a storm. His eyes flashed with alarm. "Did someone... see you?"

Vincent sighed, looking down at him. "No, Father. There was just... a feeling."

Father stood up. Gathering the cloth band around his wrist, that kept his cane within easy reach.

"I...will be in the office chamber for some time tonight." He said to no one in particular. He turned to leave. Vincent did not answer him. He stood, staring out across the cliff to the waterfalls. His arms across the wide chest. His tawny hair tousled by the falls's soft breezes.

GIFTS TO A GOD

It had been a hectic number of days for Catherine Chandler. The Paulston case was at last over and she could breathe for a while before plunging into another case. At least she had thought so.

She was looking forward to the weekend with the anticipation of seeing Vincent again. She was still thinking about him on the way back from a half-eaten lunch. Sitting down at her desk, she began to clear up when Moreno's door slammed with a resounding bang. Joe Maxwell. A look of pent-up rage on his lean face stalked quickly passed her.

"Joe?" she queried. The average-built man with dark wavy hair turned around. His dark eyes were but slits. He walked back over to her desk and leaned against it with both hands.

"I hate this!" he complained loudly. "Some wacko slices up two kids and gets off scott free!"

"What?" Catherine sat, aghast. Color drained from her face.

"Yeah," Joe simmered. "The woman's got Diplomatic Immunity." The last was said as if the words

themselves had a bad taste to them.

Catherine's brow furrowed. "You mean... she's a diplomat?"

"Seems so."

"Then what...?"

Joe's brows met above his nose. He turned around, leaning his backside against her desk top. "You tell em," he said angrily. "Why would a diplomat be in Central Park in the middle of the night? Alone yet. At least that's what she says. And why would she slice up two teenagers like that. God. You should have seen the police photos. It looked like some animal had killed them."

Catherine grew cold inside. She had heard that term all too often when Vincent had been involved in a murder to protect her. "Is she still in the interrogation room?" she asked.

"Yeah. Her and her hotshot Federal lawyer."

"Okay." Catherine soothed, grateful that Joe could not see her anger, or her nerves. "Let me see what I can find out."

"Cathy?... Cathy!" Joe called after her. But Catherine's quick even strides had all ready carried her too far away to hear. The door slammed behind her as she entered the interrogation room. The young black woman was alone. Catherine was at once taken aback as to how slender she was. But her frown did not alter. Remembering what Joe had said, she wondered silently how such a delicate looking woman could have done that kind of damage.

Titiena had been sitting quietly at the table. As her gaze came up to see Catherine, her face visibly paled. She stood so quickly that her chair clattered to the floor. She did not bother to bend to right it. She only stood staring eerily at Catherine.

Catherine set her purse on the table. The line of her strong jaw set. "My name is Catherine Chandler," she began. "You don't have to talk to me without your lawyer present. But I warn you, I want the truth about this case."

Titiena's voice caught in a throat that had suddenly grown as parched as the desert. She leaned against the table for support, still looking at Catherine. "You...." She hesitated, surprised to hear her own voice. "You... are the 'She'."

"Excuse me?" Catherine puzzled. "I'm a lawyer with this office."

"But...You 'Are' the She," Titiena insisted.

"What....are you talking about?"

Titiena bent then to right her chair and slumped heavily into it. A scowl marred her features. Why was this brown-haired woman being so vague? Titiena knew the line of her face. Her voice. "You are the she," she repeated. "The woman who was with him... Vinache'." The last was said with such reverence that a cold tingle crept up Catherine's back. Her mouth stood agape.

"What?" she managed. "I told you. I'm with the District Attorney's Office. I want some answers."

"Does 'He' send you to me?" Titiena half-whispered. "Does he know that I am here?"

Catherine lowered her head in frustration. Just what was this woman trying to pull now? Insanity? The coldness gripped at her insides as Titiena continued.

"Vinache'. The Lion....who walks like a man."

Catherine dropped into the nearest chair, stunned. So this was the intruder on their walk that night. Determination to keep the secret set her jaw. Her green eyes like dark jade.

"Why did you kill those two boys?" Catherine demanded. The lawyer in her now at the forefront. Hiding the quaking that demanded equal relief. Somewhere down deep inside, she felt a strange pull.

Vincent was feeling her fear.

Titiena sat straighter in her chair. Her dark eyes cold. "They attacked me. I defended myself."

"Is that what you'll plead?"

Titiena scrutinized Catherine's face. "I plead nothing," she said flatly. "I have told all of you the truth. The lawyer said I will not go to prison. That I have Diplomatic Immunity."

Catherine bristled. "Why were you in the park alone?"

Titiena looked at her squarely. Her eyes like that of a crow. They made Catherine uncomfortable. "To wait... for *'Him'*."

Catherine had had enough. She stood, throwing the strap of her purse over one shoulder. "Do us both a favor," she snarled. "Mind your own business. Stay *'out'* of Central Park." She let the door slam behind her. Taking satisfaction in the noise, she sighed just as Joe rounded the corner into the hall.

"Anything?" He asked, hopefully.

Catherine grimaced. Thinking fast. "We've got a real fruitcake in there, Joe," she said. Quietly she checked her wristwatch. "I have to go. I haven't had dinner yet."

"Is that an invitation?" Joe smirked, good-naturedly.

"Not exactly." Catherine edged, smiling nervously. "See you tomorrow."

"Right."

Catherine's dark auburn hair dressed the shoulders of her coat as she got into the elevator. By the time she reached the lobby, the scowl had returned. Vincent had to be warned.

Father stepped aside as Cullen and Vincent hefted the large heavy trunk into the office chamber. They set it on the Oriental carpet with much groanings of relief. Behind them, a few of the children were bringing bouquet after bouquet of flowers. More in small pots.

"What is all this?" he asked, mystified. Vincent stood smiling.

"I... don't know. We found it. In the pipe junction tunnel to the park."

"You mean... inside the junction?" The older man's eyes narrowed in concern.

"Yes," Vincent agreed offhandedly, as he bent to examine the glided trunk more closely.

"Surely it must belong to someone," Father argued.

"Yes," Vincent said, fingering the two lion's head latches. "Me."

"What?"

"It's true, Father," Cullen said, showing the children out. "We went up to check the aqueduct by the fountain. Mouse had discovered a leak. But when we opened the secret door, there was all this stuff, sitting in the center of the junction chamber."

"There," Vincent said softly, satisfied from behind them. Pressing the two heads at the same time had released the lock. Slowly Vincent pulled the lid open.

"Oh my...." Father's eyes widened at the contents. Looking at Vincent, he said, "That still does not explain how this could be yours." Vincent pulled a hand-scrawled note from his boot top and handed it over. Looking at Father's scowl, he shrugged.

"The jewels are more than likely... costume types. We... all agree we can use the clothing."

"Yes," Father argued. "But...." He paused, his eyes skimming down the note. "Who is... Vin-a-che'?"

"We couldn't make it out very well either," Cullen confessed. "The writing is pretty bad, but by the look of it, we thought it was for Vincent. Maybe left there by a Helper."

"Or... a surprise. From Catherine," Vincent added.

"Oh heavens!" Father laughed, seeing Vincent pull a deep purple cloak with a hand-sewn gold gilt around the neck out of the trunk and across his chest. Over one shoulder, favoring Father with a toothy grin. Father could only shake his head and laugh at the funny face.

"I hope it can't hurt," he relented. "But I want an extra sentry posted up there. That is one of our main entrances. We *'do'* have to be careful."

"Yes, Father," Vincent agreed.

"Of course, Father," Cullen chimed in. Neither man, though, had been paying attention. They were much too busy going through the opulent fashions in the trunk. Vincent reached deeper inside, his hand pulling back with a gold medallion. Cullen stared at it as his friend slipped the chain over his head and let the disk rest against his chest.

"That looks like you," Cullen observed. Vincent fingered the face, turning it toward his own. A soft smile curled his cleft mouth.

"So it does," he commented. Father had been inspecting some of the flowers. Most were of an exotic nature and at this time of the year, very expensive. He sat in his chair behind the desk, rubbing at the beard at his chin with a fingerless gloved hand. Watching Cullen and Vincent.

It was late by the time Father had put his pencil down once more. The candles at his elbow needed replacing. As did the oil in the lamp a little to his left. He pulled his reading glasses from his nose and set them atop his ledger. He had managed to have Cullen and Vincent make a thorough list of everything the truck contained. It hadn't been easy. The trunk was placed in Vincent's chamber temporarily, until he could decide what to do with the contents.

A few small things he had allowed them to take. With the stipulation that they be given back should any problem arise. One odd crystal he had kept for himself to examine later. He reached into the vest pocket he usually kept his pocket watch in. Fingering the uncut jewel stone.

The sound of a footstep reached him as he picked up his half empty tea cup. Catherine entered through one of the three arches looking tired and bothered.

"Catherine," he moved to stand, setting his cup down.

"Father," she said, waving him down. "Are you busy?" Her tone was clearly urgent, though her manner would not have suggested it. Father returned to his seat, motioning her to one of the chairs before his desk.

"Not at the moment," he tried to sound reassuring.

"I need... to talk to you."

"Is something wrong?" Father worried.

"It could be. I don't know," Catherine confessed. Quietly she sat in the chair closest to the desk. "It concerns Vincent." she said. Watching the look deepen on Father's face. "Because of that I thought you would be the best one to talk to."

Vincent stood by the octagon table in his chamber as they came through the lower level arch. A small-time earlier he had felt Catherine's fear. Unable to prepare for bed for wondering, but knowing it was not a life-threatening feeling, he had opted to sit and read. He felt her presence as Catherine had entered the tunnels and had wondered why she had not come to his chamber directly. The troubled look on Father's face only heightened his own.

"What is it?" he asked without introduction. "What... has happened?"

Catherine's eyes narrowed at the sight of the gold, lion's head medallion around his neck. The same she had been Titiana wearing. Vincent looked down at it, sensing something was wrong. Catherine's anger.

"Vincent," Father began. "We... have something to tell you. I don't think you are going to like it."

FOR THOSE BELOVED

Vincent sat morosely in his high backed chair. A single candle illuminated his face. Resting his chin in his hands, elbows against the table top. A frown creased the place between his heavy brows even deeper. After their discussion, Vincent had followed the angry Catherine to the threshold beneath her apartment building. The door between her world and his. His own thoughts crowded out. He felt only frustration and anger from the woman who was his life. There was something more. he knew. Something that ran deeply into her soul. Into his mind from the bond they shared. Yet its meaning refused to clear, leaving him puzzled.

He and Cullen had then returned the trunk and all of its contents to outside the junction tunnel. Father had discovered that the uncut jewel crystals were real. The fashions of the most expensive materials. That is addition to knowing that this woman diplomat was literally above the law. Beyond reproach, made the matter imperative. Did little to settle his own anxiety.

What was worse. She knew about the pipe tunnel. Did she also know how to operate the secret door? How had she been missed all this time by his unique senses? His hearing and eyesight were far above human norms. His quick quiet step almost unheard by them - like a jungle cat across the grasslands of the savanna. His caution was hewn by years of living with the constant danger of discovery and capture. Yet, with all of this, she had eluded him.

That and the realization that the park, his refuge, was once again no safe place for him to roam, curtailing what little freedom he could take from the night and his circumstances Above. Anger filled his eyes. His vision clouding at the edges with a dangerous red haze. Quickly, he threw his cloak over one arm and left his chamber. There could be only one safe way to channel his anger. That was to run.

Catherine let the night's breeze rustle through her hair. She stood on her balcony looking out at the lights. The tears had long since dried on her cheeks. The anger remained. It was so unfair. Why was their love always such a struggle?... Vincent. Of any one being in the world. He was all and everything. Her love. Her life. They had been through so much. Why could they not just live like normal people? The frown deepened. The anger burned. She knew why and suppressed the thought.

She turned back into her apartment. Moving to close the French doors. The phone rang. It was very early in the morning. Some time after two. She wondered who could be calling at this hour? For a

moment she moved to answer it. Then remembered she had set up the answering machine. She stood. Her bare feet sunk deeply into the plush carpeting of her living room floor.

"I know where you live," began the call after the prerecorded message. Cold shivered down Catherine's back. It was the calm and even voice of the diplomat. "I do not know why you have lied to me. Mark me well. I will see him again. I will not rest until I do. If you interfere, I can take no claim as to what will happen to you." The telephone clicked silent. Catherine's heart pounded against her ribs.

"Oh God!"

Without his knowing why, his fleeting footsteps led him upward toward Catherine's world. His quick feet eating up the distance between them

The weakest of early morning's light began to streak the night's darkness. Pushing back its curtain of black. The skyline of Manhattan reached up from the earth, like dark jagged fingers against the gray. Vincent pulled back from the troubled embrace. He had to leave. They both knew it. Yet, for that brief span to which they had held each other so closely, the danger had seemed far away. Neither had wanted the time to end.

"I... must go." He spoke at last. His tone full of remorse. Catherine knew it too. Though she wished with all her heart that it weren't so. They were both in danger now. Deja vu bothered Vincent at her reluctance to come Below. Yet, he could not for her against her will. His head bowed. His voice low he said, "I... will watch for you, Catherine." With that, he dropped to his hand holds beyond the balcony's ceiling and was gone. His own dark memories following him back through a steam grate and the secret door.

Morning had faded into the orange yellow glow of mid-afternoon. Catherine's work had kept her busy. For that, just this once she was grateful. Her sleep, when it at last came, had been full of malicious phantoms, who tore her heart from her breast, or struck Vincent down like an animal. He, too, lay in death and silence at her feet. She, helpless but to watch. Somehow, she knew Vincent too had shared these nightmares and was worried for her far beyond what he had said. She, too, was concerned. but her concern was for him.

How had Titiana followed him? Known about the pipe tunnel? It was almost inconceivable that Vincent would be so careless as to let himself be followed. What then? Was he ill? Was there something terribly wrong that he had not wanted to burden her with? Her mind raced. Taking a deep breath, she glared at the paper she had read over twice. Rationality calming her panic.

It had to have something to do with Tatienna herself. Her strength would have had to have been phenomenal. The photographs she had borrowed from Joe were horrific. She scowled. If she hadn't known the pattern of Vincent's kills, she could have thought it had been him. The scowl deepened. What then? So much damage. So quickly. Catherine chewed on her bottom lip. A thought straying across her mind. She licked dry lips reaching for the phone. Her hand shook as she picked up the receiver and punched up Dr. Peter Alcott's office number.

ANCIENT IDYLLS

Vincent woke sitting straight up in bed. His long bangs plastered to his wet too warm face. He caught his breath in two large gulps. Holding one hand over his heart. He blinked several times to be sure he was actually awake and shook the tangled mane. It had been so vivid. Cold prickled his skin, even underneath the heavy cotton night shirt. At first he thought the dream a result of Catherine's link with him. He had experienced her nightmares as well, but this one went far beyond those. Putting bare feet on the floor, he steadied himself enough to stand.

Father was instantly alarmed at the touch on his arm. He sat up in bed, rolling the quilts off until they rested in his lap. His hair was sticking up in several directions. At any other time it would have seemed comical. "Vincent... What in heaven's name?"

"I... have to talk to you, Father."

The elder turned to look at him. His face darkened. Vincent was still only in his night shirt. He sat up straight and propped the pillows around himself bidding his adopted son to sit on a corner of the bed.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed.

Vincent sat gingerly. Trying not to jostle the bed for fear of hurting Father. Of aggravating Father's bad hip. His head down. His voice soft, he began, "I... had a dream, Father. A... horrible... terrifying dream."

Titiena set the metal bowl in the crossed legs of the small gold statue. Into it. She crumbled a gray wafer and added a green liquid. Her hands moved with fluid grace from table to statue bowl. Moonlight from the open window of her suite filtered into the room, mingling with the soft candlelight, caressing the unclad dark outline of her body, to illuminate the shrine of Vinache'. A match struck and dropped into the bowl created a quicksilver fireball that almost immediately faded, cascading into its own ashes.

She murmured the ancient prayers. The chants of her homeland. As she drew two fingers into the ashes and pulled its blackness across her dark cheeks and forehead. Two attendants helped her into the ceremonial robes while the other three waited. The men, dressed in loincloths, leather moccasin boots and carrying long sharp metal tipped spears. Titiena turned to them with resolution. She must see Vinache' again. To see him, to speak with him. Even though the legends said that to do so might mean forfeiting her life.

Catherine left Peter's office still shaken. He could give no clue as to what to do about the situation, except to repeat what she herself had thought of and dismissed because Vincent was involved. As she reached her apartment, she noted that someone had pushed an envelope under her door. She almost stepped on it when she went inside. Her hand trembled. The foreboding that had followed her all day making her nervous and jumpy. She pulled the letter from the badly scrawled envelope and stood staring at the numbly. The color drained from her face.

Catherine did not see the two men lurking in the shadows as she entered the closest pedestrian ramp to the park from her apartment building. One grabbed her head, the other her hands. Neither was prepared for Catherine's street fighting. She yelled. The second man went down in shock. A high-heeled boot shoved hard into his mid-section. The first toppled over Catherine, as she used her own weight to unbalance him. She ran. They caught up to her not two yards away. The first man's right cross sending her into oblivion.

Vincent nearly fell as his swift forward momentum was blocked. It was as if he himself had been struck. He staggered backward. Caught himself. Blue eyes turned icy cold. A low snarl escaped his lips as he raced on through the tunnels. Up to the junction entrance and the park.

The moon was full overhead. A bright white circle in the darkness. Vincent, his senses sharp, his pulse pounding. Rounded out of the junction tunnel. His direction a straight line to Catherine... His vision keen through the red haze.

Catherine woke to a sour pungent smell. She opened her eyes to see Titiena standing before her. Anger colored her face.

"You!" She spat. "I told you. Stay *'out'* of Central Park!" She tried to move, but found herself held by two very capable warriors. "You don't understand what you're doing!"

The completely calm look on the African woman's face did not change. "I know that he will come for you," she said. "I know that he shall be angry at us who dared to take you. I have known this since first I saw you together."

"Then... why?"

"Because it must be. Few others have seen *Vinache'*. That privilege is left for those who die in battle. Or for those whose lives he must touch... or take as his wish desires. I know the ancient stories. I have lived them."

Catherine's frown deepened. "You think he's some kind of god?"

"He is," Titiena stated matter-of-factly. Suddenly Vincent burst through the tall foliage and into the small clearing. His cloak swirling around him. His eyes bright with rage. His hair wild with the running. His hands formed into lethal half-open claws. He roared, baring his sharp teeth as he landed. A quick look and he moved toward Titiena at full speed.

At the same time, Titiena turned to face him. Calm. Unafraid. The men drew back, releasing Catherine. She did not notice as she screamed at him.

"Vincent! No!"

For the second time, Vincent wavered. His head went down. The heavy mane shaking forcefully. Vincent dropped to his knees. His hands to his face. All in the space of a heartbeat. Titiena bent and pulled one clawed hand into hers. She held it reverently. Vincent tried to clear his vision. He blinked, trying to compose himself. Everything was a blur. At that moment, Catherine found she was free.

Vincent stood shakily. The flush of anger was gone. Replaced by anxiety. The question frozen on his lips. He pulled his hand from Titiena's grasp and looked down at her, puzzled.

'You are Vinache', she mouthed.

Vincent's brow furrowed. "My name... is... Vincent."

"But... you *'are'* *Vinache'*." she repeated. "The he who was the greatest of warriors. The man/lion who became king to our people. Our god." She dropped to her knees. The tribesman encircling the three of them warily. Catherine stood there, unsure of what she should do. Her body trembled. She wanted to run to Vincent, to protect him from this mad woman. But, they were outnumbered. She had no weapon, and one spear point could end both their lives. Her dream came back with stark clarity.

Vincent looked at Titiena. A hundred thoughts racing through his mind. The threat of being captured

again brought to reality. Catherine in danger. The dream. "Why... have you done this?" he asked. her. Forcing his voice calm. "Catherine is... no threat to you."

Titiena looked up. Standing, she put her hands behind her back. "I... had to bring you to me. Oh great Vinache'. My time in this place grows short. I must return home soon. Your people again have need of you. The wars are destroying everything. Our culture, our heritage... It has been said that you were only a myth. But I believed. As many still do. Come back with us. Show the others that our god has not forgotten us. End this war."

Vincent's head lowered. "I cannot," he said softly.

"But... you must!"

"I... am... what I am. I cannot change it. Nor can I leave this place."

"But, you are Vinache'!" Titiena insisted. "You are the god of compassion as well. Of protection. Is it not so?"

"I... have told you," Vincent tried again.

A scowl crossed Titiena's face. "Yes. Yet you are talking to me. You did not take my life. Though I was prepared for it. Your act of mercy deserves one on my part."

"What do you mean?" Catherine worried, finding her voice.

Titiena did not look at her, but continued to stare up at Vincent. "I will... spare your life, Catherine Chandler. If he comes with me. I do as I must. If he will not come, then he must destroy us all. Here and now. That is the way of things."

Vincent's eyes narrowed to slits. He felt that she had meant every word. The men around them had lowered their spears in readiness to fight. Each having that same look of resolution on their faces. Catherine shook her head no. Vincent lowered his head. When he raised it again, it was with such regal bearing that even Catherine was taken aback.

"You have... passed the test," he said, to the surprise of all of them. "I shall go with you."

"Vincent? No! You can't!" Catherine protested. "I... I won't let you!"

"You *'must'*... Catherine." His voice was somber. Controlled. "Tell the story."

"No!" She shouted at him. Tears falling freely from her eyes. "Vincent!"

His brow furrowed deeply. Catching her in his riveting expression. "He who fights... will have their own rewards," he misquoted. Catherine stood stunned. Vincent took the woman's outstretched hand and very calmly walked away with her. The tribesman followed them, Catherine almost forgotten. Left alone in the dark, she stared after them, still not willing to believe it had happened. Tears filled her eyes anew as she turned and ran toward the junction pipe tunnel and the secret door.

THE HIGH PRIEST

A week passed by. Vincent had found life Above very confining. He was allowed freedom only in the floor that the delegation occupied. He was brought anything that he wanted or asked for. Anything that was, except the one who meant the most to him.

He awoke suddenly from another nightmare. Still breathing heavily, bathed in damp cold sweat. Titiena, it seemed was instantly there. Sitting gently on his king-sized bed next to him, her fingers running gently down the soft hair on his back, trying to soothe him. Inside he recoiled. The touch was far too intimate.

"What can I do?" she asked, gently standing up.

"Leave me," Vincent managed. He pulled the light sheet and blanket up closer around his unclad

chest and shoulders.

"You still think of her." It was not a question.

"I have told you," Vincent's tone was annoyed. "I.... am not sure that it is the right time... to return. There is much to consider."

It had seemed that they had had this conversation over and over. A rehearsal without an opening night. Vincent wrapped the silk sheet tighter around him. What had once been a luxurious feeling was now commonplace. He found himself longing for the patched and worn coverlets on his own bed. These were no longer comfortable. His head down, he closed his eyes. Only to be assailed again by wave upon wave of sorrow and despair through the bond he shared with Catherine.

Catherine had gone to the bridge often of late. Feigning illness to Joe, she couldn't work without Vincent. There was no spark, no point, no end to tormented nights full of bad dreams and loneliness. To days with no warmth, no expectation. Nothing. She could only worry. Wonder and hope.

The cold wind off the water burned her cheeks a bright pink. She looked for no shelter. Her gloved hands gripped the hand rails for some time. She paid little attention to their stiffness. Her thoughts were only on Vincent. That once again he had been taken from her.

This time the cage was a gilded one. Containing luxuries she could only imagine. All bestowed on one so beloved. Vincent deserved all of the opulence and more. Titiena, in spite of her actions, was a very beautiful woman. Catherine found, to her amazement, that she was jealous. She thought how many times she would have given anything to have Vincent just come into her apartment from the balcony. Still, a cage was a cage. Even if this one had no bars. There was no way she could help him, not this time. And that made the situation even harder to accept.

Night passed into morning. Titiena stood by Vincent's bed, watching him as he at last slept. Watching as the shaft of sunlight traveled across the bed to bring glorious golds and palest amber to his tawny hair. Vincent, or whatever he had chosen to call himself in this incarnation, was beautiful beyond words. Strong yet compassionate, she closed her eyes, thinking of him. How so much like the jewels set in the face of her medallion. Yet, full of life. Deep shimmering pools that at any moment could become wild gray tempests.

She sat down in a chair by the door that connected their bedrooms. Rubbing her shoulders at the gooseflesh that sprang up whenever she was close to him. She did not wonder at why Catherine Chandler had been so hostile any longer, for she had found that in an odd way, she had fallen in love with him too.

In one short week, she knew why all the women who had attended him in the ancient says were revered almost as gods themselves. And... why once he left them, that they had died without violence or known cause. She smiled sadly, knowing all of the answers. Absently, she wondered about Catherine. About the being lying in the bed before her. Did they also have a connection so deep that once she had brought Vinache' back to his own people, would she too die?

The question went unanswered, for she had refused all messages and phone calls from Catherine. Notes and letters she tossed without reading them, without allowing him to see them. There was a sadness in Vincent. She noticed it more often now. Even though he had tried to hide it. He seemed

very well versed in hiding his feelings. She wondered if it were that way because of his countenance, of the way men would look upon him, those who were afraid of their own weakness.

Vincent stirred, a slight turn of his head, his breathing became deeper, fuller. She stood and hurried back into the bathroom. Earlier, she had run him a bath and would prepare again to bathe him. Perhaps this time, he would allow it. She could only hope.

Titiena had had security doubled since her return with the hooded man that night. No one had seen him since. The woman behind the counter wondered if he were a prince or something. But all of the people from the conference had been dreamed strangely. So it was with the man who stood before her desk now. He was tall, around five foot eight, with a lean clean shaven face, his long dark hair hung down over the brightly colored bolero at his shoulders, the black shirt underneath a contrast to his dark swarthy skin. She suppressed a snicker. For he looked like nothing less than a genie from Aladdin's lamp. Despite his slim waist and a gold medallion with a lion's face on it hung from a chain around his neck. She had seen one before on one of the diplomats.

"Can I help you?" she asked. His dark piercing eyes were outlined in black and she tried not to stare at the man's face. At the three deep scars across one cheek.

"... I am looking for the rooms of Titiena Konachek." He said in clipped English. It reminded her of the Hindu Indians she had had in the hotel the week before.

"Her rooms are private, sir. I'm not allowed to give out their location."

"That is... quite all right. May I then ask you to leave a message... for me?"

"Of course."

"Say that Master Daveen has called... and that I will call again?"

"Surely," she smiled.

"Thank you... so much." With that, he turned and slowly walked away. The phone rang and she picked up the receiver. Daveen took advantage of the distraction to turn a corner and quickly step into the men's washroom.

Vincent grew tired of trying to learn their language. His teeth always seemed to get in the way. Slurring things when he wasn't supposed to. He had read every book in the room. Some that Titiena had brought with her. He was grateful that her meetings had called her away. That she would not return until late.

Pacing the living room did little good to relieve his frustration. The silks and golds and all of the opulence had tarnished, faded. The gold-plated sandals were uncomfortable. He had taken them off, opting for bare feet several times, only to have one of the male servants tie them back on. This last time he had lost his temper and growled at the man.

He chuckled to himself at the man's humbled look. At least it was something different. He had searched for his clothes, wanting just that small feeling of home. He had stopped when Titiena had told him that she had had them sent to Catherine. That day, in his bed, Vincent had cried. His decision had been made to save her life, but to what end would it lead him. He was easily angered now, depressed and homesick. At one point he picked up a satin pillow and tore it to shreds, taking pleasure in the feathers falling all around him.

It was not until his attendants began picking them out of his hair and off his skin, that he realized the extent of what they would do for him. The pillow was also quickly replaced.

Morning waned into afternoon. He had taken a cup of tea and three large steaks for his midday meal. Noting that even the appeal of food was fading. He missed Mary, the children and Father. His own private moments away from the rest.... Catherine most of all. He sat on the throne that had been set up for him and closed his eyes. Trying to picture where she was. What she might be doing. But his searching pulled back only dark sadness and despair. It was as if somehow he had died. She was mourning for him.

Two attendants raced into the room at the sound of broken glass. Vincent, standing half on-half off the throne platform snarled at them, showing his teeth.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, picking up the heavy wooden throne stool. Angrily, he threw it against the opposite wall, sending all that hung there crashing to the floor. The purple cloak whirled as he turned away from them and swept back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him, almost knocking it off the hinges.

A card was passed to Titiena at her meeting. Quietly she excused herself and left to make a phone call.

A cold shower and into the evening hours later, Vincent emerged from his bedroom to see the throne had been restored to its former place. The animal skin was set over it with the soft fur side up for him to sit on. With a sigh he walked up onto the platform and sat down. Suddenly, a commotion from outside caused him to look up. Two of his servants came in, half dragging someone dressed in black. A white man. They looked sheepishly up at Vincent as they dropped the man on his belly. On the floor in front of him, dark eyes met those that were blue when the prisoner looked up.

"Iksnay Irateplay," the man said to the puzzled leonine.

"He... will stay," Vincent announced. "Leave us." When they had gone, he looked deeply into those dark eyes once more. The ends of his mouth curling into a soft smile. "How?" he asked simply.

"Blame the Old Man," Devin laughed, rubbing his jaw. He stood up and stepped back to get a better look at his scantily-clad younger brother. "How'd you get into this anyway?"

Vincent shook his head. "My... looks."

Devin's smirk widened to a smile. "I told you," he teased, "they'd get you into trouble some day."

Vincent gathered the deep purple cloak around his bare arms. "I suppose," he lamented. "I would not have minded so much if... she would have let me keep my clothing."

"She?" Devin's face lit with a mischievous grin that Vincent knew well. He shook his head, pondering.

"We are... always the same," he said.

Devin cocked his head to one side, imitating him. In his best Aussie accent he said, "Well, mate. We can't go against our natures now, can we?"

Vincent chuckled. The tension lines around his eyes, easing.

"That's better," Devin said, using his own voice. He sat down on a couple of the multitude of pillows around the throne and looked seriously at Vincent. "So... tell me. How did all of this...." his gesture swept the room, "happen?"

Titiena tried to calm herself before entering Vincent's private rooms. She had been told of the odd intruder and of Vincent's violent mood. She had cut her meeting short and hurried back to the hotel. Not knowing what she might find, she opened the double doors to the stranger sitting cross-legged on the floor with Vincent, playing some type of card game. Both rose as she entered.

His face, she could have found handsome if she had not noticed the medallion around his neck. A scowl marred her features. "You mimic us very well," her voice was full of acid.

"He is... leader of my people here, Titiena," Vincent explained. "Hear him."

"I am called Deveen," Devin said, bowing as he did. Rising again, the scowl on the lady's face had not changed.

"Is that supposed to impress me, Daveen?"

Devin flashed a confident smile. "It is only who I am, Miss Titiena. I have come at the request of my people. They fear that the one you call Vinache' will leave us. I am here to advise him."

"Vinache' needs no one to guide him," she argued.

Devin's dark eyes sparkled. Vincent sat back down, watching them, for once, enjoying his adopted brother's favorite craft.

"Perhaps then, he needs to be reminded of the old stories, of what his people expect of him."

"How would *'you'* know that?" Titiena snapped.

"Because... like you, I follow in his ways. There are people here who cling to him for their survival. His place now is here. It has been for many years. If he goes with you, then he will be giving up all that will be of our future. Our maidens will die without children. Even now."

Titiena shot an accusing look at Vincent, who was not at all sure he was hearing the jist of the conversation right.

"Is this true?" she asked. Vincent lowered his head more in confusion than to any acknowledgement of fact.

"You see?" Devin continued. "Do you want an angry vengeful god?"

Titiena's face paled. She had only seen him with Catherine. How many others would his absence effect?

"No," she said. The frown deepening. "He will stay. Come with me as was our agreement."

"Have you forgotten," Devin said pointedly. "The two people you have killed." Titiena did not answer him. "You have an atonement to make."

Vincent felt the rage. Cat-quick he stepped between them so that Titiena's fist connected squarely with his collarbone. Tears stung his eyes, but he did not flinch.

"He will stay," Vincent said firmly. "As an advisor."

Titiena glared at him. Turning swiftly she stalked back out of the room. Slamming the doors behind her. Vincent took a relieved breath then. Sat down on the throne rubbing the redness at his collarbone with infinite care.

Devin grimaced. "I bet that hurt."

Vincent put his head back and laughed. Warmth and assurance rekindling his hope. There had to be a way out of this. With Devin here, how could they not find it.

THE MAN HIMSELF

Catherine set her coffee cup down and picked up the book she had gotten from the library. It was a large volume on obscure African religions. They were many and varied she had discovered. One prominent theme stood out. All were based on a powerful thing. Person or animal. Sometimes a combination of the two.

Under 'V' she had found 'Vinache' at last. He had come to power when two large nations clashed. A strong-willed ruler with a temper. A fierce fighter, he soon became linked with the lion in ferocity and cunning. Yet he was compassionate, truly caring about his people. He was also strange because of his caucasian coloring. Long blonde hair and blue eyes. Once the war had ended, peace restored by force. He had fathered several children. One day he left on a hunting trip alone, wearing the lion's mantle that had become his trademark. He was never heard or seen again.

It had been speculated by the author that perhaps the man had been a European sailor, who happened to be in the right place and the right time, that after peace had come to the valley, he had simply moved on, or perhaps had been killed by animals. The tribe, thinking him a god, vowed that in future time of stress, that he would come to them again from far away, lead them to victory and peace once more. A medallion was created to teach the legend. It was given to Vinache's three wives, passed down to their firstborn daughters when the mothers died.

Catherine closed the book softly. Let it rest in her lap. That had explained Titiena's urgency. The reason why she saw in Vincent the heart and soul of her god. There had been no photographs of 'Vinache', only sand paintings. Opening the book again, she stared disbelieving at the photo of the painting. He was drawn as a white muscular man. Standing erect with a spear in one hand. The unclad chest was dappled with yellow. The face a mixture of human and lion. A long blonde mane tumbled down over the broad shoulders. A sad smile touched her lips. The ancient drawing 'was' of 'Vincent.'

She shivered at the resemblance. How would she get him back? The question tormented her. Or should she? How could she compete with everything that Titiena and her people could offer him?

"That's some story," Devin sighed, leaning back on the pillows. "So, what do 'you' want to do?"

The question was such a simple one that Vincent was at once amused and angered by it. "How can you ask that? Look... at me!"

Devin stood up. A grin on his lean face. "I 'am' looking at you...So." Vincent glared at him. "It's a matter of the heart, Vincent. This Titiena obviously reveres you as some sort of god. He wasn't all that bad, you know. I read a little on him before Father sent me here. Besides, if she didn't, she would have kicked my ass out of the nearest window."

"I know that."

"And, well... you don't seem to want for anything."

Vincent stood up, clearly angry. He began to pace the throne's platform. "Devin, look at me! Do I... 'look' happy?"

"Well...."

"No, I do not want... for anything. She has made sure of that. I am never left alone Everything is done for me." He glared purposely at Devin. "Everything...." His head lowered in embarrassment. "Even... to the point of... offering herself... to me."

"Then, what's the problem?" Devin continued, playing the devil's advocate. "Most men would kill to be where you are. Hadn't we dreamed of being kings?"

"Yes... as children." Vincent shook his head. "The wild imaginings of a child. But Devin... that... is all they were. Dreams."

"And now?"

"I don't know," Vincent answered, upset. "Another life, one where there is no danger. One... as you so aptly put, without want. To be adored instead of shun. Yes... it has its allure." Vincent sat back down, looking at Devin directly. "But Devin, it... is not me. My world, my... home... my... heart... is here."

"With Catherine."

"Yes." Vincent looked down at him sadly. "With Catherine. Our time together is always... so measured. Yet... I could not wish for anything more. Somehow she makes me feel... beautiful."

Devin understood. His grin faded to concern. "Okay. Then we'll just have to figure a way out of this mess. One that'll save face with everyone."

Water lapped gently at the sides of the great ship. In the bridge cabin, the captain stroked his snowy beard. A great contrast to his ebony skin. The hand carved pipe was his favorite and after a good dinner, he had settled down with a good book. They had taken on a cargo bound for Luanda earlier in the week. He was holding anchor only for the conference delegation. He puffed a little harder on his pipe. Now there was a strange bunch.

Most of them would like to cut their neighbor's throat as look at him. Perhaps that was why they had had to sail all this way to be reasonable. He chuckled to himself.

"Captain...." his second called. "You have a shore-to-ship call."

"Who is it?" he asked through teeth that sill held his pipe.

"It is Miss.Titiena." The captain's look of annoyance did not go unnoticed as the first officer handed over the radio phone.

Titiena was wearing a scowl when she hung up the telephone in her bedroom. The ship's captain was decidedly angry about her latest request. One for another cabin for the return trip home. She and her people had already occupied three. Asking for four was too much. That meant that this Daveen person would have to stay with she and Vinache' throughout the long trip. Her instincts told her not to trust him. Yet, she could not deny Vinache's wishes either.

The talks were at last drawing to a close. She had not gotten everything she had asked for. But, there had been a few concessions. One of them was Vinache'. He seemed in better spirits with this Daveen around. Daveen had done everything he could to keep out of her way. Being very charming all the while. Still, the man bothered her.

Vincent looked up from a chess game the two were playing as she entered his private rooms. When she had gone, Vincent reached down and helped Devin to his feet. The other's broad smile easing the tension.

"Are you sure," Devin began, "you want to give up all of this?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready then?" Devin studied the worried face.

"Yes."

Morning crept along the city scape. Catherine had been up since before dawn. There had been no noise. Nothing out of the ordinary. She laughed, ironically to herself. What was ordinary any more? Messages from Below had been the same. Nothing new or nothing at all. She had returned to work, waiting at the phone for long hours for any Helper's call. Scoured the papers for any news about the trade talks. When they were expected to end.

Inside there was a dark pool of emptiness. As the days passed, it seemed to grow, to pull every part of her into its black depths. Little by little.

The alarm beside her bed rang her usual wakening hour. She reached over and pushed the button to silence its loud buzz. Throwing off the blankets, she got up and padded across the run to her bathroom. The tile floor there was as cold as a tomb on her bare feet. Even the hot water of her shower refused to warm her spirits.

Titiena returned from the closing talks looking very tired. One of her people had packed up their belongings. Dinner was served in everyone's rooms by room service. All that was except of course Vincent's. Devin and one of the warriors had intercepted the waiter at the door. Vincent and he ate in silence. A light meal. Afterward, Titiena insisted on the ceremonial garb for Vincent. Complete with the deep purple cloak. Devin made himself scarce. Taking a bag from Titiena's room, he stuffed it with a few pieces of clothing for himself and Vincent.

Vincent frowned at the barbaric attire she had come in with. It was certainly not fit for the cold evening of a New York harbor. Nonetheless, he slipped into it to please her, allowing her to place the cloak around him. A quick glance at Devin told Vincent that all was well.

Catherine's head was pounding by the time she got off of work, grateful that it was again a weekend. She was not feeling at all well. It felt as if a part of her was dying. Grieving for Vincent and herself. Vincent had taught her to be strong, to take adversity as it came. Still she wondered how she could go on, to live without even the prospect of seeing him again. The despair threatened to engulf her.

She left the parking garage some time later, found herself walking along the bridge. She couldn't remember how she had got there. Watching the moon overhead, she smiled remembering times shared with Vincent. Her gaze moved out toward the water. The moon's reflection rippled in the water. She stood transfixed by it, lost in its silvery endlessness.

Vincent walked along the railing of the merchant ship's deck. It was a sturdy ship, but worn by storms and sea air. The riggings were strange and fascinating. He kept a part of his mind alert and aloof.

Devin had talked with several of the delegates to familiarize himself with them. Then he hovered close to Vincent. The purple cloak's hood hid most of his features, the darkness the rest. Vincent had been careful not to get too close to anyone walking on the deck. The wind touched his hair as the ship weighed anchor and began to move out to sea. He stood by the rail, his hand gripping it tightly. Soon they would be beyond the point of turning back.

Vincent sensed the nervousness in his brother as he moved closer to the rail. Titiena was talking with one of her party and did not see the movement.

A loud splash sounded. Her eyes grew wide in horror as Vinache' was nowhere to be seen.

"Man overboard!" Daveen cried loudly, stepping back from the rail. They did not hear the second softer splash as crew people came running. Daveen shed his brightly colored overcoat and dove overboard after the dark splotch in the water before anyone could stop him.

Titiena ran to the rail. Her face pale, directing two of her people into the water after them. The loud horn sounded as the captain tried to slow the ship to a stop. Bright floodlights were moved to illuminate the water on that side.

The two warriors came to the surface twice. There was no sign of Vinache' or Daveen.

Not far from the commotion, two heads broke water. One, a soft pale ginger. The other dark.

Catherine gazed out over the water to the strange bright point of light at the harbor exit. The outline of a huge freighter stood blackly against the purple of the sky. She wondered what all the search lights on one side were all about.

Sighing sadly, she turned away and began to walk back to the car when she stopped. Unsteadily, something felt as if it were pulling her toward the bridge. The water. How long she stood by the bridge she didn't know. A sensation, a twinge of relief, of hope touched her. She gasped as two dark shapes broke the top of the cold wind-swept waters. They stood, one taller than the other. Before she knew it, her feet were carrying her down the bank to the rocky beach and the water's edge.

Devin still held to the black bag, laughing so hard he could hardly catch his breath, his other arm around Vincent, who could only cough and drag himself further into the shallows. Silently, he thanked whatever gods there were, that the belt that held his loincloth on had not worked loose in the swim, even though the wet cloth tangled around his legs like an uncontrolled tail.

He did not hear what Devin was saying, as a dark shape tossed a coat around his bare shoulders. But the warmth that filled him made him smile. Catherine, soaked up beyond her waist, took him by the other arm, helping to guide him along.

When they reached the safety of the rocky shore, she gripped Vincent in an embrace so tight, with a heart so full of joy, that he never wanted her to let go.

"Come on, you two!" Devin admonished. Standing and dripping onto the rocks. "I don't know about Vincent, but I could use a towel!!" Both of them stared at him. Smiles filled their faces....

Vincent looked down at Catherine, her eyes shining with the love she had never really expressed to him before. His eyes misted, he drew her close again. In a husky voice he quietly said.

"Take me... home..."

END