

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

by Patricia Anne Kehoe



Once upon a time ...

The old woman sat alone in front of the dying embers of a once roaring fire. One gnarled hand gently stroked a somewhat aged cat, the other held a large book affectionately. As the cat settled down in front of the dying blaze, she smiled down on it and slowly began turning the pages of the book, stopping here and there to stare at old photographs and illustrations, and the many words written alongside the artwork. Smiling through tears that fell unnoticed from eyes worn out with long hours of writing, the silver haired woman remembered the past - her past.

Tilting her head, then nodding when a voice from the cherished past whispered to her, scenes unfolded, admonitioning her to never forget them. As if she ever could forget, even if she had wanted to.

For those were the good days to remember, the happy days of her ... TWO ... lives. The real life contained a husband, two wonderful children and a family of relatives and friends that ranged from one end of the then known world to the other. In that life she had been wife and mother and content, being that.

Oh, but the other life! That was the one that called to her as she sat reminiscing of old memories. A resonant, melancholy voice whispered to her, speaking her name as if beckoning her to return to his side, where she belonged.

A faint, blue mist drifted over the room; coloring it gently, lighting up the faded wallpaper until it shone as radiantly as a new mirror.

A pair of deepset, dark eyes fastened to hers. "Come, my friend. It is past time; this ... life isn't yours anymore. You MUST come; you said you wanted to. Remember? I'm here to bring you down. Catherine has your tea waiting. Are you prepared to come with me, now? We must hurry, this ... door can open only one time for each of us. Please ... "

Holding out trembling fingers, the woman rose shakily to her feet as a large, furred hand reached out to grasp hers gently. Looking up into the most magnificent face she had ever seen, the teller of tales smiled. Her eyes flashed as those of a young girl's would have. She clasped the tattered book of

stories to her breast. This was not to be left behind. Much loving, hard work had gone into these pages. "Yes, I'm ready now."

She reached down for the small bundle of fur purring against her ankle. "Is it allowed? I can't leave my cat to fend for herself; she's very old. "

"She may come with you, of course." A rumbling, feathery laugh washed away the murky shadows of the room. "You always were fond of ... cats, hmm? Come. We're late already. Our portal shall be gone soon."

With one last, loving look around the room, she took hold of the hand outstretched towards hers...

And stepped into the mist ...

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In the land known as Carhdreel, the people gathered in the Great Hall at the cock's first crowing. It was the hour for their new leader to be chosen. The excitement and anxious anticipation of the throng, was well evident as they milled about. Talking amongst themselves, old friends greeted each other, as they awaited the arrival of the Oracle, or as some named him, the High Alchemist.

Parents holding their own sons glanced surreptitiously at those held in the arms of other parents and nursemaids. Which male baby would it be? Who would succeed the late and much beloved King? No heir had he left, nor any kin to claim his throne.

Now, was the Cycle of Tamfar; a time and circumstance which went beyond the memories of those gathered here. Even the oldest of their populace had no recollection of this sort of an assemblage before today; except as memories inscribed in the Book of Truth.

Now had the hour come to establish a new line of succession. But, which family would be afforded this honor? Which?

"On your KNEES! Pay homage to he who comes among us!", proclaimed a herald, as he cracked a silver staff on the stone floor.



As a body, the people looked up curiously. On the top step leading into the Hall, stood a man; his flowing beard and hair dressed in a manner unknown to his audience.

Nearly eight feet tall, the High Alchemist's height was extended another foot by the mitered hat resting atop his head. He was strange to look upon; gaunt, almost emaciated, with slitted, jet hued eyes, and long fingers tipped with curved, lethal looking nails.

As the people on their knees whispered amongst themselves, mesmerized by his look, the Oracle stared back at them without expression. Even though this man was the one alien in appearance, his piercing eyes made the people feel it was they who were out of place; awkward and inferior. Who or WHAT now stood among them?

This dread of him was exactly the effect Altazar had hoped for. He knew these people well. To have appeared overly informal with them, or ordinary in countenance, would have evoked their scorn. They were a proud race - an old race; the citizens of Carhdreel respected the Oracle because of his .. differences .. and knew that his authority came from the Ancient One - the Lord of Lords.

Yes, Altazar was aware of his own importance, of his role in the scheme of things, and in his position of absolute authority, he played his 'part' .. well.

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The High Alchemist regarded those waiting for him imperiously. As the top of his mitered hat grazed the arched entry into the Hall, he gathered up the hem of his voluminous robe and seemed to float down the steps.

Although he'd been chief advisor to their late Majesty, many of those in the room had not seen the High Alchemist in over sixty years. Some had never seen him before.

Altazar had not only been the King's most trusted confidante, he'd been his counsel in all matters of State. Yet, being who and what he was, the man kept to his own Manor for the most part. The humdrum, day-to-day lives of these people, didn't merit his concern. Over the years, when the King had needed his ally's guidance, HE went to Altazar; Altazar did NOT come to him.

The High Alchemist of Carhdreel was a haughty man; one filled indeed, with much pride and arrogance. For good reason, as this chronicle shall tell.

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Prodding aside Castle guards with the tip of an impressive crystal wand, the Oracle came to a stop in the exact center of the Great Hall. Nodding slightly to the few people he deemed worth his attentions, he ignored the remainder of them out-of-hand. His knowing eyes swept over the crowded chamber, sensing the avarice in these anxious vassals. Their love of gold and jewels made them subservient to their greed,

To the parents of these young males, both low born and those of nobility, this was a time of anticipation, yet also a time of sorrow. Whatever child was selected as Prince Regent, brought honor to his family, and wealth beyond imagining to their coffers.

The sorrow came in the knowledge that whichever child was chosen, his family would never be allowed to speak alone with him again, or even to visit him here, in the Castle, without the express permission of the Oracle.

It was rumored that the mother and father of their deceased Lord hadn't seen him since the day of his Coronation, because Altazar would not give consent to an audience. If that were true, how sad for the family. Yet, the parents of the late King would not have DARED argue the Law with this man.

The dictates which governed this world, lay predestined by the writing in the Book of Truths since the time beyond beyond. To contradict or disagree with the judgements of the High Alchemist, had meant death to many over the years,

or lifelong imprisonment. Altazar was NOT a man to be defied or challenged. One didn't confront a Divinity, and surely, this man was not a mere mortal!

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As he slowly made his way through the crowd, many of the Court glanced at their companions. Would it be Lord Mila's child, he of dark hair and sable eyes, who would be chosen? Or, would Asreth, the son of a common baker; red-haired, with the screams of a banshee when angered, lead them from this hour? Or perhaps the child of ..

"Stand and be SILENT .. or suffer my WRATH!"

The tone of Altazar's words told the multitude he would brook no further speculation in this matter. This was HIS choice .. he would make it in his own good time.

An immediate hush fell over the Hall. The eyes of each set of parents met those of their fellows. Who would soon have to kneel to who?

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Pulling reflectively on the length of his white beard, Altazar made his way slowly through the rows of babies. Scanning each face, he looked deeply into the eyes of those awake; commanding impatiently for any sleeping child to be immediately roused, to accomplish the same.

As his inscrutable gaze met child after child's, they shrieked their terror aloud, bringing consternation to their parents, and disgrace on themselves; for, in the land of Carhdreel, tears were never - EVER yielded to. Tears meant frailty, and a King never cried.

Eyeing the puling brats with revulsion, Altazar was not pleased. There was no child here of possibility .. none met the one, unalterable condition known only to him.

Now, what was to be done? With no leader, this land would fall into chaos. Overlords would vie for the crown, leading to bloodshed and anarchy. This must NOT happen!

The Alchemist's jaw tightened. To choose wrongly would shame him in the eyes of his ancestors, yet to choose one of these .. creatures .. out of desperation, would lead to the destruction of this entire world one day. This, he was certain of .. this he KNEW.

Then, what was the answer?

Ignoring the curious stares of those gathered, the Alchemist pulled a small book from the pockets of his voluminous robe. After studying it for only a moment, he moved to the far end of Chamber.

Stopping before throne's podium, Altazar's shrewd eyes darted left, then right. When he was certain no one was close enough to overhear the words he invoked, the mystic cocked his head to peer into a crystal which sat ensconced atop his wand.

The crystal's glow changed from pristine white to a fog of gray, then to undulating shades of blue. Swaying slightly, quietly the Oracle began to chant an unfamiliar laity in a submissive tone. It was a tone he was NOT used to employing, but he knew it was the only one that would bring him the answer he sought. He needed the wisdom now, of the Ancient One.

"With the words written before the seed of earthly man was first sown, I envoke THEE, oh, all-knowing one. Come forth; enlighten thy servant. Show me the way, through THY power!"

Altazar's hand passed over the crystal orb once, twice, thrice. "Alar .. amadar .. COMDURUM!"

In the courtyard, a sudden crack of lightning split the heavens. As the morning sky turned ominously bleak, fingers of rain scratched against the stained glass windows of the Great Hall as if to tear them from their metal sashes. What malevolence now lurked out there, and was fighting with all its' power, to get INSIDE?

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Holding their children fast, the people trembled as the lightning waned, leaving the sky purple in its wake. A lingering tumult of thunder echoed along the length and breadth of the Castle walls. As women turned their faces towards their husband's arms, seeking safety, the men struggled valiantly not to reveal their own fear. Never had they witnessed anything to equal the forces that lay in the hands of the High Alchemist. What manner of man was he?

Listening to voices only he could hear, seeing into years as yet unlive, The Alchemist found his answers.

Pivoting on his heel, he faced the shaken people, ordering tersely, "Bring unto me the child of Anias, the Outlander!"

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Near the back of the hall, a young woman screamed. She tried to push her way through the guards and get away before they could stop her. "NO! Not my son. Please .. NO!"

The buxom, very tall woman clutched her baby tightly to her breast, as guards surrounded her. "No!", she cried. "You shall NOT have him! NO! I shall ne'er see him again. Oh, do not take my son. PLEASE!"

Covering her face with her hands, Anias fell to her knees as the boy was ripped from her arms. "Vincent! My child!"

Ignoring her cries, from one end of the Hall to the other, women whispered into the ears of their husbands; appalled by this turn of events. What? THEIR children were to be overlooked in favor of the spawn of THAT woman? Why, she wasn't even one of them; his late Majesty had taken her in battle only seven months before!

Already pregnant when she had been captured, Anias was from the land of endless sun known to them as .. Aelur. Her child looked like ALL the males of what these people considered to be a satanic region. The boy had the face of a .. a. BEAST! Surely, HE was not to be the new King!

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As the woman bemoaned her loss, Altazar felt an unfamiliar sensation touch at his heart. Was this pity? Why should he feel thus, for .. her?

Holding the baby in one arm, he glanced over at Anias. Strangely enough, he DID feel sorry about what had to be done, yet it was the law. The Ancient One had decreed this child be examined for worthiness, and examined, he would BE.

Yet, Altazar's heart would not harden against Anias's cries. Curious. Shaking off the peculiar sensation, the Oracle looked down at the baby he held. True, this one had the face of a beast, yet .. not a beast. There was something majestic about this child. Something in his face, in his eyes ..

Barely catching himself, Altazar swallowed the cry of shock that threatened to burst forth as the boy opened his eyes and gazed calmly at him. Eyes the shade of the Great Salt Sea looked into Altazar's with no fear - none whatever.

Chewing on one chubby fist, Vincent, son of Anias, met his destiny with courage. He reached out his other hand to grab and hold fast to the crystal orb on the Oracle's wand.

"It is DONE!" Fighting off a sudden urge to laugh, the High Alchemist held the child over his head, proclaiming, "He claims his legacy by doing what no other child dared DO! In him, shall the promise be fulfilled! On your KNEES! Pay homage to Vincent, King of Carhdreel!"

Seeming to obey an unheard OTHER, Altazar did something completely without precedent. Waving away the nurse who came forward to collect the babe, he wrapped Vincent in one corner of his velvet robes.

"I shall see to his upbringing myself."

Staring into the stunned faces surrounding him, the High Alchemist declared, "With our new King, in his Castle, shall I dwell, until he reaches the age of enlightenment."

The portent was added solemnly. "And, woe be unto him, that would do this child harm. To ME, will all answer for such folly!"

Gliding over towards the sobbing woman, Altazar helped her to her feet, his voice less threatening than moments earlier. "Anias, attend thy son. I shall not stand between thee and thine, for thy bond with him is essential to his well-being. I have learned this from the Ancient One and I obey his edicts."

Sobbing in gratitude, the auburn-haired woman took her son and fell to kiss the hem of the Oracle's robe. "With my life, shall I guard him, Lord - always. Thank .."

Brushing past her, the man gave a embarrassed, "Hhrrumph! Woman, hold thy tongue! Do what is expected of thee and annoy me no further!"

Looking back over his shoulder just in time to see Vincent happily playing with his mother's hair, Altazar bit back a chuckle of satisfaction. Ignoring the entreating hands held out towards him from the quite displeased parents of the other children, the High Alchemist swept past them without comment, and left the Hall.

Would what he'd done here this day bode well in the years to come, he speculated? Would revelations be forthcoming from the Ancient One, as to why an Outlander has been made King, or would the Keeper of All Truth hold that knowledge to himself? What was to be gained by this decree? Altazar had done precisely what he'd been TOLD to DO, yet when the child had grasped the Orb of Wisdom, he'd been as surprised as the people had been!

Brow furrowed in thought, the Wizard strode towards his chamber. Although he knew the Ancient One was infallible in all matters, Altazar couldn't help but wonder if He was acting judiciously, in this case?

Only time would tell.

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The five year old boy sat huddled in a secluded and little used corner of the Palace garden. Settling down on the damp earth as far away as he could get from the intrusive figure of his tutors, as well as the knowing eyes of his guardian, Altazar, the child leaned back against the gardens stone walls, sniffing quietly.

Stiffening his resolve not to cry, Vincent folded his thin arms across his knees, then buried his face there; hiding his grief and fright from anyone that might have been nearby.

Today, as the first threads of light came upon this land, his mother had been summoned to the dwelling place of the Gods. No more could she be with him, Vincent thought dejectedly. No more would they laugh and play among the great, tapestried chambers of this Citadel, or wander the fields of flowers to gaze at the wonders of botanical creation in this exotic, yet beautiful empire.

Nevermore would his mother be there at night to tuck him into bed with a kiss and hug, or tell him tales of her own home - Aelur; the valley beyond the shadows of the moon.

As the young boy bit his lower lip, fighting against the urge to scream his sorrow aloud, a solitary word resounded in his head and heart - 'nevermore .. nevermore, NEVERMORE.'

Although he was King, Vincent was still only five years old. As long suppressed tears started flowing down over the knees of his tunic, he cried aloud, "Mother, oh, how I shall miss thee!" Weeping bitterly, the little boy was overcome by the reality of all that had been lost. From this moment, he was ..alone.

From the time of her capture by the late King, and subsequent isolation from her beloved husband, the life force of his mother Anias, ebbed, until finally, she had no strength left to dissuade the harbinger of death from taking her to its bosom.

Many times, she'd explained what would happen to her son. Anais told Vincent that in her world, when a person .. loved .. they were joined forever to the one chosen. A bond then formed that was unbreakable; sacrosanct. If one died, the other died within a single cycle of the moons of Frenth .. a years time. If the two souls were parted, death would also come, but on slower feet; as it had for Anais.

With all her strength, she tried to endure the emptiness in her soul, by submerging all her love, all her emotions, into the rearing of her child. But, fate would have its way, and destiny could be a cruel Mistress.

For the first years of his life, Vincent had not been truly aware that his 'differences' kept the people from accepting him as one of them. None had ever DARED voice that notion aloud, or even hint at it with the slightest gesture of disrespect; none of the populace were foolhardy enough to incur Altazar's wrath openly.

Since his mother's death earlier today, already his subjects true regard of him, made itself known. Their distrust and envy showed in their faces .. such pitiless faces. The people of Carhdreel resented Vincent, this he knew. He saw it when they looked upon him. Their eyes labeled him a FOREIGNER or even worse, a USURPER.

All his life, his mother had stood between Vincent and the people's animosity. Now, she wasn't here, to guard the boy any longer. He sensed the people's emotions, felt their distrust, and it shattered him.

He was not only alone, now he was unloved and unwanted.

Wiping his face in the cuff of his shirt, Vincent sighed as he regained his composure a little. Leaning back against the stone wall, he closed his eyes. Well, at least Altazar liked him. Didn't he? When in the presence of the Alchemist, Vincent felt confused much of the time. One moment the Wizard would be patient and kind as he taught the days lessons, then he'd grow silent, and merely stare at Vincent solemnly.

Those was the worst of times - having Altazar just LOOK at him, with those funny eyes of his! At times he'd stare into Vincent's eyes without saying a word, until all the candles in the chamber burned low in their holders.

Then, the man would nod his head, and continue their lessons without comment.

The boy was more than a little curious, as boys would be. What did the Wizard SEE when he looked at him, like that? Once, Vincent had actually gathered up enough nerve to ask Altazar WHAT he was looking FOR or AT. All he got as a response was an enigmatic, 'the future .. your future'; which told Vincent absolutely nothing!

"SO! THERE YOU ARE .."

Slowly looking up .. up .. until the back of his neck ached, Vincent's eyes locked to those of his tutor. Arms folded across his chest, the gaunt figure of Altazar stood over him. "My young Lord, you were NOT excused from the ceremony at the Shrine of Mythen in honor of your Mother, were you?"

Vincent's firm little chin went up stubbornly. "No, I wasn't excused."

"Then, pray tell me, WHY were you NOT in attendance?" Demanding an explanation, the Oracle's tone was grating.

Getting to his feet, Vincent brushed the dirt from the back of his pants. "I just couldn't .." Tears welled up in his eyes. "... do it."

The boy turned his back, hiding his tears. Kings weren't allowed to cry. "I didn't want to see the bier!", he exclaimed. His slight form began trembling. "I couldn't see my mother, like that. I won't ever go there. I WON'T!"

Chin up defiantly, he turned to face Altazar. "And even YOU can't make me go to that scary place!"

Never failing to be amazed at the child's command of language far beyond his age, nodding, Altazar gestured to a nearby bench. "So be it. In matters of the heart, your will, not mine, shall be done."

He glared at the boy, "But, ONLY in matters of the heart shall you command MY deference. It is my dictates that are in command here, until you are of the age of enlightenment. Until then, you SHALL abide by MY judgments, for you are a child! Now, at this moment, my intrusion into your time of mourning, is one of necessity, so come here and sit down."

Vincent didn't move. His pride wouldn't let him. After all, he was the King, not Altazar. Certain gestures of respect were NOT to be disregarded, even by the Oracle.

Understanding the look in the boy's eyes, Altazar motioned to the bench again, this time smiling benignly. "If it please my lord King, would you deign to sit down?"

"Yes." Unable to keep a victorious gleam from his eyes, Vincent looked over at the Oracle. "What do you want of me?"

"Want of you? Nothing. I have a gift for you."

"A .. gift?" Vincent was astonished. Never in five years, had Altazar given him anything of a personal nature.

"Yes, a very special offering I bring forth this day; something captured by your Knights in the forest of Pern,

as they hunted there, for your evening meal."

Altazar waited and was not disappointed.

Vincent's eyes were round with curiosity. "What was captured? A wild boar? One of the sacred, black tigers?"

"No, nothing so .. mundane .. as that.", Altazar teased.

Forgetting WHO he was, the boy gripped the edge of the Oracle's cloak. "Oh, please, tell me!"

"I shall not tell you, but I will show you .."

Clapping his hands twice, Altazar nodded to the Knight standing just outside the gardens pathway. "Enter. Deliver your offering to the King."

Barely able to contain his excitement, Vincent got to his feet, eyes darting back and forth, trying to see what was being led into the garden. It was white and seemed to have the form of a small pony.

The Knight rounded the last turn in the shrubbery and stood before them. As he held tightly to a golden leash, eyes the color of the forest met Vincent's.

Plunking down on the bench hard, the boy gasped, "Why it's a .. IS it a Unicorn?"

"You have learned our legends well, it seems. It is as you say, a Unicorn.", replied Altazar. "Sadly, it was caught in one of the snares laid out for the other forest creatures. One of these beings has not been seen in our land since the time before even I was born."

As Vincent stroked the head of his new ally, the High Alchemist continued, "Once, these beautiful creatures were the greatest of our treasures. They brought good fortune and times of plenty wherever they dwelt." He closed his eyes. "Ah, I can still see the splendor of them, as they grazed on the grasslands of Pern. Such nobility was theirs, such .."

Vincent interrupted, "What happened to them? Why aren't there any more Unicorns in the forest now?"

Stroking the flank of the newborn creature, watching as it tried to sustain its wobbly upright position, the Oracle shook his head glumly. "Few remained when they finally withdrew from this land, in order to save themselves from total annihilation."

"What happened?, Vincent asked.

"Over a period of time, people came to think that the horn of a Unicorn had miraculous powers. Wrongly, they believed that ground into a fine powder, the horn could restore a dying person to health if imbibed."

"Can it?", Vincent whispered; not wanting to frighten the small animal that was patiently tolerating his touch.

"No! Only the Ancient One takes a life, or restores it to well-being, as HE sees fit! But, people can be driven to great folly when trying to save the lives of their fellows."

Altazar's eyes met those of the boy. "Especially a loved one .."

Pondering this, Vincent knelt beside the Unicorn. His eyes filled with sorrow, he asked, "But, if they took the horns and no lives WERE saved, WHY did the people keep doing it!"

"Times of desperation bring desperate actions.", intoned Altazar. "The Book of Truth tells us that the King of that time forbade his subjects, on pain of death, to kill any more of the Unicorns. The creature dies when its horn is removed. Yet, knowing THIS, people disregarded the law, continuing to slaughter them by the hundreds, until .."

Altazar made a sound of revulsion deep in his throat as he rose from the bench.

Vincent tugged at the hem of the Alchemist's robe. "Until what?", he urged.

"In the crystal of Truth, have I seen the land of these creatures. Until early this morning, three had survived. Only three."

"That's all!", gasped the boy. "But, if only three are left, then .."

Putting one hand on Vincent's shoulder, Altazar shook his head. "The mother of this animal before you, was also found in the trap - dead. All around her, the earth had been torn up by the roots, as her mate tried vainly to free her. The male was found in a ravine, where he must have stumbled and fallen. Both of his legs were broken. Discovering this, one of the Knights had to put an arrow into the creature's great heart."

As if to protect it, Vincent wrapped both of his arms around the baby Unicorn. "Both parents are DEAD? If that's true, then this one is the last Unicorn that will EVER be born!"

"Yes. And, I give this young female to you, as your companion." Altazar's words were softly spoken. "I know that she will never take the place of your mother; who I came to respect over these last five years. Anaïs had great courage and was a woman of majesty in her own right."

Gathering up his robe, the High Alchemist admonished the young King, "I am certain that you will treat your gift with the reverence she deserves - as the last of her kind."

"Oh, yes, I will!", Vincent promised. "I shall call her Kitera. My mother told me that was my grandmother's name. In her language it means - Beloved One."

"Yes, I know." Altazar gave the boy a strange look. "Kitera? Are you certain this is the name you would choose?"

"Yes, why? And, why do you look at me so?", Vincent asked, puzzled.

"It is of no consequence .. as yet." Giving the Unicorn a last glance, Altazar watched with interest as it burrowed its nose into the hand of the young King, as though searching for food.

Or, perhaps, searching for love?

Unnoticed, at the edge of the garden the Oracle stood looking at the young King and his treasured pet for a long time. As Vincent stroked and petted the Unicorn, Altazar

nodded matter-of-factly. He had seen this day happen many times, in his visions. How many nights had the face of the King as a grown man, the horn of a Unicorn, and screams of suffering, whirled about his brain until he thought to go quite mad?

In the dialect of Anias, the name Kitera did indeed mean Beloved One. But, in this realm, in the archaic tongue, the name Kitera evolved and became Catherine. That name did NOT mean Beloved One in this domain. Here, the name Catherine meant .. sacrifice.

Feeling the weight of all his years as never before, Altazar paced wearily towards his chamber. The affirmation of the Ancient One made more sense now, then it did five years ago; although as yet, he hadn't come to terms with the vow.

On the morning Vincent had been declared King, as he held the orb of Truth, Altazar had heard the voice of the All-Knowing one proclaim .. § And in HIM, shall the joining of dark and bright be fulfilled. Harmony and peace will his descendants bring forth unto this land, forever. This, do I forswear to thee, my entrusted servant. This child's seed, when strewn into the body of his bond mate, shall bring forth a son that will rule all of the galaxies! All strife shall end with his birth. The time of yielding life .. for life .. is preordained, and the sacrifice of ONE, shall be the legacy of multitudes .. §

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And, in the fullness of time, Vincent grew into a King such as the people had never imagined he would be. He dealt fairly with all, low born or high; meting out rewards and penalties as they were deserved, no matter who was involved. The people grew to love him in spite of his somewhat strange .. countenance.

Each and every son that had been slighted when the Oracle chose Vincent as the new Monarch, was given vast wealth and made a Lord of the court.

The people knew, that against the wishes of Altazar, each Lord and his family was taken into the confidence and household of the King. They were welcomed as his brothers, and indulged as fairly as each deserved. There were those among them that were jealous, which was natural under the circumstances, yet, in time, even they came to admire and show deference to the being that was their Sovereign.

One could not help but love Vincent.

Even unto foreign shores, went the word of the justice of Vincent of Carhdreel. He was acknowledged and revered as no other King had ever been before him. Even the nomadic tribes that honored NO ONE, deferred to his judgements without question - or - quarrel.

By Vincent's side, as he grew from a boy of five into a man of thirty, stood Kitera. She was the other half of

his heart. Vincent drew strength from Kitera's silent understanding when he was troubled. He rejoiced with her, when there was time enough after matters of state, to revel and romp like two children in the forest. The only area not frolicked in, was the forest of Pern. Vincent didn't want to remind his beloved Unicorn of her parents' death in that wretched place. As if she needed to ever be reminded.

Although Vincent couldn't know her thoughts, it was only with his love and attentions, that Kitera survived at all. When first captured, she'd wished to die, for life then, promised only never ending solitude. Her parents were gone. She was the only Unicorn left now. The concept of aloneness brought such a sadness at times, it nearly overwhelmed Kitera. But, her King assuaged the anguish, and overcame her death wish. Vincent's need of her, made Kitera want to live. His love for her, made her HAVE to live - for him.

Kitera knew this handsome being loved her as much as he could love one of her .. kind. A day came, when that fact was TOLD her aloud!

Once, on one of their excursions, Vincent and Kitera had come upon one of the court Squires and his lady. They were laying together in the tall, sweet smelling grass. Kitera had wondered what they were doing? Vincent KNEW what they were doing! He'd lowered his mouth to the Unicorn's ear to whisper of how people mated in his world. Then, he vowed that if she were like him, he'd love her in that way, for she was his soul mate and he would have no other in her place.

Pondering THAT bit of information, Kitera stole another look at the couple in the grass as Vincent led her from the glade.

Was that love, then? To bind your bodies together, like THAT? She wondered how it would be, to lay with HIM, in that way? Kitera would enjoy loving the King with her body, if she was of his form. How would it feel to have his magnificent hands and legs wrapped around her, as the squire had his touching his lady?

Well, it did no good to think on it. Kitera wasn't a female of his species, and all the wishing she could do, wouldn't alter that fact, even a little bit.

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On a day filled with the smells of Spring, the Unicorn nuzzled into Vincent's cloak pocket, where she knew he would have a piece of fruit hidden just for her.

Kitera was glad now that she hadn't died. It would've been a terrible mistake to leave the King alone among these people. Although they loved him, none of them understood him as she did. Not really.

Her Lord was alone also, as she was. Oh, the court and the Knights kept the King good company, but, he had

not mated with any woman. Vincent had no female companion, except her. Kitera knew why he'd never taken a Queen, since his confession that day in the forest. Yet, he MUST be lonely. Oh well, that was the choice of the King, and not really her business.

And, while she wished her Lord well, secretly, the Unicorn was delighted he remained unwed. A Queen would have usurped HER place, and most likely would have wanted Kitera to live in the smelly old barn, instead of her special place in the palace. If anyone, even a Queen, had forced her to live with the chickens and horses, Kitera would have bitten the wench on her Regal RUMP!

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Munching contentedly on a piece of apple, Kitera watched Vincent saddle up his horse Endar for their daily ride. She eyed Endar critically. He was nice enough, for a .. common .. horse. Oh, he was BIG, she'd give him that, and very handsome to look upon, with his coat as black as pitch. But, as far as she was concerned, Endar was far too swell-headed for his own good! He was merely a horse, after all, NOT a Unicorn!

Deciding to put him in his place as she usually did, first Kitera reared up on her hind legs, then she began to prance around Endar, throwing him a sideways, haughty glance as his saddle was fastened.

SHE was never ridden; her Lord didn't allow it. Kitera snorted at Endar contemptibly. He could be a beast of burden; that was fine with her. Yet, she would have carried the King anywhere he wanted to go, without protest, just to be closer to him; to feel his legs tighten against her sides in the same manner he tightened them around Endar, as they jumped over fallen trees.

Kitera snorted at her own foolishness. Was she disdainful of Endar's position as the King's steed - or was she jealous of it?

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After looping a strange looking piece of leather around Kitera's neck, Vincent patted her, then swung up into Endar's saddle. Kitera pawed the ground happily. It was time to go out on their own. Oh, the fun they'd had over the years! Sometimes, Kitera would hide, then peek out at the King from between the branches of a tree. He would laugh, pretending not to see her for a time, then Vincent would lunge at her, roaring as she tried to outflank him.

Other times, when it was rainy outside, they played in the Caves of the Wind. They had been laid out by an unknown people centuries ago in a maze-like structure. If one was careless, they could get lost in those twisting corridors of rock forever. Vincent always knew the way out, even when Kitera couldn't find the passageway!

It was such fun to dash down one corridor and hide, then burst out in front of the King and lead him a merry chase through tunnel after tunnel, until they were both too winded to continue the game.

Kitera wondered where they would go exploring today?

But, as the Unicorn tried to follow Vincent out of the paddock, something held her fast. Turning her head, looking behind her, the Unicorn stared at the twist of leather binding her to a wooden post. She was TIED! Why had her friend tied her thus? He never had before.

A sudden scent of blood in the air and the danger it foretold, caused the Unicorn to strain against the harness with all of her might. All at once, Kitera KNEW the King's intentions! He was going to the forest of Pern. NO. He mustn't go there! In that forest lay evil, waiting for him. WAITING for HIM. She knew it!

Snorting wildly, Kitera tensed her muscles against the leather thongs, pawing the earth until her hooves were bloodied.

Turning in his saddle, Vincent looked back, then shouted "Kitera, NO! You must not do that! Stop, I say!"

Leaping from his horse, Vincent tried to calm down his cherished friend with comforting touches and gentle words. "You cannot go with me today, my beloved Kitera. A black tiger has been seen in the forest of Pern. Three children has he killed as they gathered wood for their hearth fires. I MUST go. It is my place to go, not yours."

First running his hands through Kitera's mane, Vincent then buried his face into it, whispering, "It brings me sadness beyond reason, to know I must destroy an animal as wondrous as a black tiger. I abhor killing with every fiber of my being, but this animal has turned into a killer of children. He must die before he murders any more of my people."

Stroking Kitera's flank, Vincent continued, "I have put aside my rite of passage into manhood far too long, because I did not wish to kill .. anything. The law IS the law, my beautiful friend. Only a King is allowed to kill a black tiger. He must go alone, without even a sentinel or companion to guard his back. This is very dangerous. Please, try and understand why you must NOT go with me this day?"

He brushed back Kitera's mane to look into her dispirited, green eyes. "If any harm ever befell you .." Leaving the thought unfinished, Vincent hugged the Unicorn fiercely around her neck, then turned away quickly.

Ignoring Kitera's shrill whinnies of discontent, and the battering of her hooves on the ground behind him, Vincent's eyes were glazed with pain as he stumbled toward his mount. If the black tiger was too clever, Vincent knew he would never see Kitera again.

Not in .. this life.

Poking at the campfire with the end of a stick, Vincent rested his back against the trunk of a great Oak tree. Never one to grumble about solitude, for he rarely had any, still he felt lonely for the first time in many years.

He missed Kitera so desperately, his entire body ached with the pain of the separation. Curious. He could sense her presence even here, in this dismal place. Could she feel him, he wondered, and know he was well?

Gazing up into the murky night sky, Vincent listened to the sounds of the forest. Somewhere off to his left, a Willow Owl cried out a lovecall to his mate. Further on, the grunting and snorting of a wild boar brought Vincent upright for a moment, listening carefully. But, the animal wasn't close enough to be menacing, at least not yet. On a mountain at his right side, he heard the baying of a single wolf. He sang a hymn to aloneness towards the moon of Silene. Right at the moment, Vincent felt like joining him for a chorus or two.

In the distance, he heard the rumble of gathering thunder. It would storm tonight. As if on command, extraordinary bolts of lightening lit up the blackness of the sky for a moment, then weakened to a rumbling cadence.

Ever since his mother died, Vincent had never been able to sleep in utter darkness. In his chamber, even when asleep, Vincent always had a single candle lighting up the dreary corners of his room; a fear left over from childhood, which shamed him. Nothing he did overcame it.

It was vexing, at his age, to still fear what crept about in the dark. The Oracle had assured Vincent that many men feared the darkness; it was then, that they were at their most vulnerable.

As much as he wanted to light a torch, he couldn't. That would only signal his presence to the animal he hunted, and this beast needed no forewarning.

Using all the cautious ways taught him by Altazar, before Vincent made up his camp for the night, he had stripped away all the lower branches of the tree he sat under now. Black tigers liked to pounce on their quarry from great heights. Their ability to climb was astounding. One leap could encompass an area of twenty or thirty feet, depending on how hungry they were.

Shivering down into his cloak, Vincent pulled up the hood and thrust his hands into the sleeves, for warmth. It promised to be a rather long night.

To pass the time, he thought of his favorite book of poetry; one written by a scholar known as Kahal. Such words of hope .. "On the wings of new mornings, I search for thy essence. In the mists of the wind, do I cry for that which is mine. Oh, adored one, turn back the night, whisper my name? Bring me your sweetness in the darkest of hours, as in your body, all glories I claim." *

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Just as Vincent finished his quiet recitation, the snap of a tree branch above him, made him freeze as still as death. A tiny green leaf floated down to rest against the edge of his cloak as he tried not to breathe.

What he feared most, had come to pass. Although he'd cleared away all the lower tree branches, he had not thought to examine those higher up! The black tiger was over his head!

A fiendish snarl broke the quiet as the enormous animal leapt to the ground, and stood facing him. Twin pools of pale yellow blazed as they met Vincent's eyes. That was all he could see .. eyes. Then, the animal roared again, and sabered teeth could be seen against the shadows behind them.

As his tail lashed from side to side, the tiger's nose twitched. An unknown scent assailed his nostrils. Lowering himself to his haunches, he coiled, preparing to spring at the unidentified .. thing .. that had dared to enter his domain.

Watching the cat's eyes, Vincent rolled to the left and reached into his cloak for the dagger tipped with poison given him by Altazar.

At that same moment, a great thrashing could be heard coming from behind the tiger. There was a movement of white against the cat's ebony form. Vincent leapt to his feet. All he could see in the murky forest light, were shadowed forms fighting viciously for survival. An horrendous noise split the air; the final scream of an animal wounded to the heart.

A second, gentler keening was taken upon the wind. The death knell of a .. Unicorn.

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Slipping on her blood, Vincent fell to his knees before Kitera, horrified; not wanting to believe his eyes. Long gashes from the tiger's claws had nearly cut his beloved Kitera in half. Where her miraculous horn had been, now lay only an open wound. Her ivory tusk lay buried in the heart of the beast she'd killed to save the life of her King.

Moaning deep in his throat, Vincent eased the Unicorn's head onto his lap. Cradling it, he gasped for air, then flung his head back. Bellows of despair were hurled against the heavens. "NOOOOO! Not her .. not HER!"

Brokenhearted, nearly out of his mind with grief, Vincent wrapped his arms around Kitera. "Why did you DO this? Oh, why .. why!"

He stroked the blood soaked mane as the Unicorn's eyes met his one - last - time. The radiance usually there, in those green orbs on seeing her Lord, was not in Kitera's eyes now. Heavy, nearly gray with pain, her eyes fluttered once .. twice .. then closed for eternity.

The last Unicorn was now merely .. legend.

"KITERA! No! NO .."

Unaware of the blue mist that now rolled in to cover them, the King of Carhdreel threw himself upon the body of his Beloved One. Weaving his hands through her mane, Vincent wept for something that would never again belong to mortal man. As a great heaviness came over his limbs, Vincent lay without moving across Kitera's body oblivious to time or the passing of it.

Then, a movement beneath him brought Vincent's eyes down to the body of the Unicorn. But, it wasn't a Unicorn he was holding!

Staring up at him, was a woman he'd never seen before, yet ..

Sitting back on his heels, Vincent tilted his head to one side, which brought a smile to the woman's face.

"I greet thee, my King," Whispered the winsome stranger.

"Who .. Who are you?" Vincent managed to stammer.

"Do you not yet recognize me, my Lord?" Green eyes locked to his, waiting for an answer.

Paling visibly, Vincent's eyes swept the face of the woman as she got to her feet and held out her hands towards him. Taking them, and rising to his feet, Vincent had a terrifying thought.

"This cannot BE!", he cried. "Art thou a sorceress?" He pulled his hands away from hers. "Or a .. fiend from the bowels of the nether world?"

"No.", she answered, her eyes twinkling with laughter. "I don't think I'm either one of those."

Shaking her long hair back over her shoulders, the woman stood very close to Vincent. So close, her scent invaded every pore of his body, warming him, burning him. "My name is Kitera, or Catherine. Take your choice."

"Kitera!" Vincent backed away, shaking his head fiercely back and forth. "You are not MY Kitera. How could you be?"

Not moving towards him, Catherine brushed the leaves away from the hem of her silk gown. "I don't know HOW or why I am here, but HERE I am and shall stay. A voice in my mind tells me to say two things to you."

Vincent couldn't hide his amazement, or his curiosity. "Say .. what .. things?"

Holding up two fingers, Catherine touched the first one. "I am to say to you .. 'ask Altazar. With him rests the answers to all the questions'."

Smiling at Vincent, Catherine touched the second finger. "I am to also say to you, these words: 'I am your soul mate. You shall have no other in my place. It is ME you love. In a field of sweet smelling grass, you vowed this as truth. Do you remember?"

Thinking of the day he and Kitera had come upon the Squire and his lady, Vincent searched the eyes of the woman standing before him. "Yes. I remember! It IS you. By all the Gods, it IS YOU!"

Crushing Catherine to his breast, Vincent laughed without restraint. "Never shall I lose thee again. NEVER."

Leaning back in his embrace, Catherine asked, "And, will you forget Kitera, who loved you, as I love you?"

"No. She is part of me always, until I am dust. My beautiful Unicorn. She .. You .. died for me. Why would you do that? No one is worth another's life."

"You are .. to me.", Catherine replied. "To me, you are worth everything. You DESERVE everything." She wrapped both arms around his neck. "And everything, my King, is what thee SHALL have."

"But, how came you to this place?"

"The horn gave me rebirth, in this form.", she answered.

"But, the Oracle divined that the legend of the Unicorn's horn giving life, was merely a fantasy."

Catherine shook her head knowingly. "No. Not so. Not if it is given FREELY. Then, and ONLY then, the horn holds the power of life and death. When given with LOVE, it IS magic. Do you understand?"

Taking her by the hand, Vincent lead his beloved Catherine out of the forest of Pern. "I don't understand all of this yet. Perhaps, I never will, even with Altazar's help."

Stopping at the edge of a glade, Vincent turned to face her. Resting his lips against hers, he whispered, "So, my fair Catherine, you have my consent to spend a lifetime explaining it to me, as many times as you wish to. Even if it takes .."

Her reply was breathed into his mouth as it claimed hers. "Forever .."

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And, in a place far beyond the known world, three Unicorns, two females and a male, play merrily. Chasing each other through meadows of fragrant roses, they knock the velvet petals this way and that with their mischievous hooves as they dance.

Now, if on a bleak, winter night, you should suddenly smell roses or hear a waltz when there is no orchestra, and a feminine voice asks, "Do you dance?", you'll know where it all began:

Or .. so the story goes ..

