

INTO THE DARKNESS

by Katrina Relf

Vincent awoke, the last vestiges of the dream still tugging at his senses. He was lying face down - the scent, the feel of grass around him. He remembered the dream clearly - too clearly. Catherine standing, watching dispassionately, as they killed him, as he fell. He was still lying where he fell - he must be - so was this part of the dream? The line between dreams and reality had become very thin. He had a memory of going to bed, but he had no memory of leaving the tunnels - so where was he? Panic rose in him. He turned over abruptly to face a brightness that hurt his eyes. His heart was pounding, he was disoriented. He was in the park and it was daylight, and he didn't know why he was there. By night this was part of his world, but now it was a strange place, filled with unknown dangers, unknown dimensions.

Suddenly, in the distance, a park attendant appeared from nowhere. With a swift, silent movement Vincent hid behind a nearby tree, trying to gather his thoughts. It was difficult to find his bearings - the colours were so bright. His eyes scanned the immediate area until he saw the bushes. They would offer a greater shelter. Once there he pulled up his hood to cover himself as much as possible. He knew he needed this protection if he were to get home. At night the way was short and comparatively safe, but by day how many obstacles, how many deviations would there be - to escape the eyes of man? As he hid and ran - across open parkland, behind trees, into bushes - he knew himself to be more vulnerable, more alone, than ever in his life. Never before had he known with such utter certainty how alien he was to this world of light - Catherine's world.

As he made his final dash towards the entrance he offered thanks and grasped at the hope that the nightmare was over and all would be well again. But that hope seemed not to be, as he entered the familiar darkness of the tunnels and came face to face with Mary. She spoke, but her words confused him. He needed Father, he needed his reassurance. He moved past Mary, but she wouldn't be discounted. She followed him to Father's chamber.

"Vincent, is it safe there?"

"Safe?" The word sounded incongruous to Vincent. Nothing was safe in his world anymore. "I don't know."

Father was staring at him. "What is it? What's happened? Are you ill?"

Vincent moved away from Father's approach. "Don't know."

"Vincent, come over here and sit down. Come on." As he obeyed, Father added, "Can I get you anything - a cup of tea?"

Vincent shook his head. "Something is happening to me." He covered his eyes in the hope that he could avoid too many questions for which there were no answers.

"Try to tell me."

"I went to sleep last night. When I awakened this morning I was in the park."

"It was a dream?"

"No. NO." The last word was almost a roar of frustration. "I woke up in the park."

He rose from the chair and began to pace, trying to ease the rising tension before it developed into something darker, more dangerous.

"Last night?"

"Just now - in the daylight."

Father wasn't understanding - or was afraid to understand.

"And you didn't know you had left the tunnels?"

"No. I had a dream."

"Tell me."

Vincent continued pacing the length of Father's chamber, still trying to calm that part of him that threatened to break forth at any moment. He related the beginning of the dream, but no more - he couldn't face the ending again.

Father asked, "Are you certain that was a dream?"

"I don't know. I don't know where the dream began. I don't know what happened."

"Where did the dream end? Do you know that?"

"Death - my death." At least that was part of the truth.

He sat down, his pounding head resting in his hand.

Father was unrelenting. "And then you woke up?"

Again Vincent rose. "In the park." Again the hopeless pacing. "Father, I am losing my hold. I can feel it."

"Vincent, tell me as best you can."

"My hold on myself."

"Was it anything like what happened before, when you were young? Was it anything like that?"

"Like the beginning of it, only stronger." He was keeping distance between himself and Father, as if contact disturbed him. "Something terrible ... something terrible is burning its way through me." His hands were fists, claws tearing his flesh.

"Not terrible. There is nothing terrible within you."

Why did Father deny the truth? He must know, he must see.

"That's not true - we both know for me that's not true."

"It is true - especially for you - because your struggle is greater."

"And if I lose the struggle?"

His head was resting against the coolness of one of Father's candelabras. Father had been with him before, had witnessed it before - he must understand. He must know that this was only the beginning.

"Vincent, you must watch it carefully, now more than ever before. Be aware of everything - your physical and emotional state. And you must let me stand by you, whatever may happen."

Vincent moved nearer to Father.

"I remember those nights, those dark nights. I remember the dreams. You never left my side."

Vincent looked into Father's face, feeling a rush of tenderness for this man who really didn't understand what was happening to his son, but who would nevertheless stand by him.

He took hold of Father's hand. "We cannot let that happen again - it would kill both of us."

"Do you remember how we came through those dark nights?"

"You read to me."

"Anything and everything. *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, all of Shakespeare. You came out of it a scholar." Father paused. "I think you had better rest now".

Vincent could feel Father's fear, his uncertainty. He turned to leave - he would respect Father's wishes. But, once again, love for this man rose within him, and, turning, he gathered him into his arms. He needed to show him how much he loved him, perhaps before it was too late. But, even surrounded by Father's love, he could not find the reassurance he sought.

Vincent slept fitfully, tossing and turning, the fever beginning to take hold. And always - always - the dreams - always Catherine standing, calmly watching as the bullets tore through him, showing no emotion as she watched him die.

He awoke suddenly, his heart pounding. He had no idea how long he had been sleeping, nor whether it was day or night. He was afraid now, afraid of what he knew was happening to him. He needed to share these feelings with someone, before he was completely lost. But who? He could already sense Father's fear, and Catherine would worry herself unduly. He must not cause her more pain. There was no-one, no-one he could talk to, no-one who wouldn't be more frightened than he was already. He forced himself to sit down and open his Journal. Perhaps writing his fear into words would eliminate its substance. He must try ...

"It ebbs and flows now. At times I feel as though all is well. Then I am reminded, by a sound, the reflection of a flame, or some distant echo inside, that it is returning, and how immense it is. That it is rising up within me and burying me in its path ..."

Even as he wrote the words he could feel the darkness returning. It was filling him, taking away rational thought, taking away fear. Yet still, somewhere inside, in spite of the darkness, in spite of himself, he could feel Catherine. She was waiting, waiting for him, but he wasn't sure where, he wasn't sure why.

He had to tidy himself - he must look right for Catherine. He tried to fasten the ties of his tunic, but his fingers felt stiff and clumsy. The effort, the concentration, made his face, his body, burn. He could feel the dampness on his skin, his clothes. He tried again, this time snapping the tie, and his rage, fuelled by the growing darkness within him, erupted. He ripped the tunic almost from himself, suddenly feeling his clothes to be an encumbrance, uncomfortable on his burning flesh. But then, again it was with him, his sense of Catherine. She was waiting for him. He tried to tidy his clothes, pulling the tunic together, wrapping his cloak around him.

He moved through the tunnels in the general direction of the band-shell. Vaguely, he was feeling that they were to meet there. As he neared the chamber, he could hear the music - see Catherine. Even at this distance she looked beautiful. He felt ashamed of his appearance, of having to face her as he was. Walking towards her, he spoke her name. She turned away from the music to face him, and smiled, seemingly oblivious to his general untidiness.

"Come."

She bade him sit down, taking his hand. He obeyed. She was speaking. He could hear her voice, he could hear her words, yet he couldn't understand. He tried to listen to the music, but it seemed discordant, dissonant. He turned to Catherine - her face blurred, swam before him.

She seemed concerned, "Are you all right?" Her words echoed, as though they were travelling a long distance.

"Yes."

How could he tell her the truth? How could he tell her that he was descending into a bottomless pit where only desire and death were real? Where she was lost in a blood-red mist, through which he couldn't reach her? How could he tell her anything? But no matter, she seemed content with his reply. For a while she was lost to the music. Vincent was lost to himself.

Catherine spoke - Vincent turned to face her. She looked unreal, distorted in the brightness of the colours. It reminded him of the park in daylight. She was moving her hands, her arms - soaring and swooping. He wished she would be still. He was so dizzy. He just wanted to be quiet - to be alone. Yet he couldn't be alone. Another was already within him, goading him, filling his mind with

thoughts he would rather not think. He wanted to strike out, but this was Catherine beside him, not an enemy to be torn apart.

There could be no blood, but there could be desire - even Catherine desired - he had seen it in her eyes so many times. The hunger was already there, beginning to grow within him, beginning to arouse him. He must go before it controlled him, before he was lost in its power. He pulled himself forward, away from Catherine. She mustn't see him like this. She mustn't know that a part of him wanted to take her, wanted to fill her with his flesh.

"No, no."

He leapt to his feet, pacing back and forth, trying to quell the inferno that was raging within him. Throwing back his head, the roar rose in his throat, trying to emit the fury, the frustration, which was threatening to overpower him. He turned abruptly, heading back towards his chamber, not heeding Catherine, but leaving her confused and afraid.

She reached his chamber to find him feverishly making plans, arrangements. The incoherency of his words, together with the fact that he was talking to no-one but himself, alarmed her. His flushed face was damp with sweat, his eyes wild. This was Vincent, the source of her strength, the meaning of her life, the one she always turned to, the one who was always there. What was happening to him?

"Words, words would only frighten you," he said disjointedly. Even his voice, his beautiful voice, his power of speech, was deserting him.

"I'm already frightened." she said.

"So am I," he told her truthfully.

She wanted so much for him to hold her, to tell her that everything would be all right. But he couldn't. So she held him, held him so tightly, willing him to be well.

Once alone again, he forced his mind to concentrate on what was happening to him. He was losing himself. Soon he would be lost to Catherine, to everyone. Where was she? Why wasn't she here? He needed to speak to her, to tell her that, although he would be lost to her, he would always love her, beyond death, beyond madness.

There was a poem - he remembered a poem. It must be here somewhere. He must find it. He began to search feverishly, tearing his way through the vast collection of books in his chamber. Yet every book was the wrong book - he knew instinctively, without even looking - and they were discarded, thrown, to land where they would. This complete disarray of his chamber was as alien to his nature as the creature that now searched so desperately for the lines of a poem - that would tell him - what? That would prove to Catherine that he loved her beyond his madness?

Suddenly it was there, in his hand. He pressed the book to his forehead as though it would ease the torment in his mind, and recited the words over and over. He must take this to her - she must hear it. He pulled on his cloak as he left the chamber - their bond all but destroyed by the darkness that engulfed him.

He climbed to her balcony, as he had done so many times before, but never as lost as he was tonight. As always, he tapped on the balcony doors. When there was no response he began his disconcerted pacing - the length of the balcony - reciting the words, because only they were keeping him sane, keeping the darkness at bay.

When she failed to appear, he called her name. Why was she hiding? Was she afraid of him - of the madness? She must hear the words - then she would understand. He moved to another door.

"Catherine, you must hear this."

It was a command. Gone was the caution, the gentleness - all that remained was an all-consuming need to see Catherine - to tell her. A need that sent him crashing through the glass of the terrace doors.

The darkness was waiting there for him - he had never seen it so clearly before - snarling, goading - or was it waiting for Catherine? The mere thought made him strike out, tearing his hand on the mirror. He stared at it - not comprehending the blood, the shattered glass.

Suddenly, the book mattered no more. He threw it - through broken doors, over the balcony, to land somewhere in the night. Nothing mattered now, nothing made sense. The mists were closing in and the room spun before him. He fell forward, a crashing of glass falling with him.

He was dragged from the depths of his dreams by Catherine's voice.

"Vincent, can you hear me?"

He hadn't strength enough to answer, nor could he remember the right words to use. The lines of a poem filled his mind - there were no other words. Gradually Catherine drifted away. He closed his eyes and returned to the dream.

Next time he awoke it was to a warm peace. He opened his eyes - Catherine's face floated above him, bright as an angel's.

He felt so close to her - she must be holding him. Her fingers were brushing his cheeks and she was crooning, "It's all right, it's all right."

He licked his parched lips. If he knew how, he would have asked for water. He quickly changed his mind. To fetch water she would have to leave him, and he wanted her to stay forever as she was - her fingers stroking him, her scent surrounding him. He closed his eyes and slept.

He had been drifting in a warm emptiness where every part of his body seemed to be on fire, when suddenly a damp coldness awakened him. He could see Catherine clearly, he could feel her hands on his brow, yet he had no sense of her.

"You're burning up". He watched her as she spoke, but then a movement, a shadow, behind her, caught his attention. The darkness was there - he had come for Catherine. Vincent pushed her hand aside, leaning across her as he growled his warning.

"What? What is it?" she asked.

He snarled again. He had no strength to do more - but it was enough - the shadow disappeared. He could still protect Catherine.

She seemed to be unaware of any danger. "No, no," she soothed.

He felt himself being pushed back on to soft pillows.

"No," she repeated softly, as she returned the cool towel to his forehead.

Vincent was about to lose himself in a world of half-lights when he was distantly aware of fingers opening his tunic, cool air caressing his chest, followed by the cold towel. He found intense comfort in the coolness against his burning flesh, in the touch of Catherine's hands, in her ministrations, and it lulled him back into the weight of unconsciousness.

The burning had become shivering. Catherine was holding him, stroking his face.

"I'm here." she whispered.

She was so close. She wrapped the comforter tightly around him.

"You'll come through this, Vincent, you'll come through this." Her fingers brushed his cheek, her warmth surrounded him, yet still he shivered.

Time passed - hours, days - he didn't know. They were only fleeting moments - memories of Catherine's warmth, her touch, her caring for him. Now he lay, watching her. She was speaking on the telephone, excusing her absence from work. She was probably lying for him. He wondered how he came to be here - how long he had been here. He must ask her ...

There was a movement in her bedroom. He turned, his heart beginning to pound. It was there - in Catherine's bedroom - watching her, waiting for her. Defiling that most beautiful of places - a place

only visited in dreams. His lip curled, the growl starting deep within his throat. The Other merely glanced at him, then turned back to Catherine. In a total rush of fury Vincent threw himself through the louvered doors. There would be no escape this time. As he crashed to the floor, he raised his head, still growling, looking around, his eyes searching the shadows in utter confusion. The darkness had gone. There was no-one else in the room but him. He let his head sink back to the floor.

Vaguely, he was aware of Catherine encouraging him, helping him to stand. She was holding him, leading him, laying him on her bed. And then, at some deep level of consciousness, he was mindful of the fact that Catherine was laying down with him.

Vincent awoke to a strange softness and Catherine's voice reciting the words that were burned into his memory.

"Though lovers be lost, love shall not, and death shall have no dominion".

"And death shall have no dominion".

Somehow he was able to repeat it - to let her know that he had heard. To let her know that he understood.

"You knew those lines?" The effort of speech, the concentration, exhausted him, and he drifted off again into the blessed comfort of sleep and the strange, unreal world of his dreams.

This time he could feel Catherine near him, her breath on his face. Her hand was touching his hair, his cheek, the soft warmth of her lips against his neck. In this waking dream he had no power, no control, and her touch was arousing him so easily.

He opened his eyes. Above him he could see Catherine's face, her beauty was shining upon him. She was touching him, loving him, so gently. Her lips brushed his mouth, her hands were touching places she had never touched before. And he was helpless. Helpless to the feelings arising within him. If this was the darkness, he had already surrendered to it.

Instinctively, his arms enfolded her, pulling her closer to him. His need for her was becoming a throbbing ache in his groin, and yet it was so beautiful he didn't want it to end. So unlike those desperate, unspeakable dreams he had known before. To feel her body so close, so warm, so inviting, his hips began moving, rising, responding to Catherine. And she was there, and he was lost within her, within her softness, her warmth, and in the wonder of her love. He knew nothing but the sensation of Catherine surrounding him, and the power, the sweetness of his release. It was a feeling more blessed, more fulfilling, than anything he had ever known. Too beautiful even for tears. If this was but a dream, forever let him sleep, forever let him stay, in the shelter of her arms. When he opened his eyes again she was smiling down on him. She looked like an angel. He closed his eyes and slept as he hadn't slept for so long.

The dream had ended and he was at peace.

When he awakened it was to a room softly glowing in the evening light. It was Catherine's room and he was in her bed. Her scent was all around him. He knew that he had been ill and he knew that Catherine had cared for him, but more than that he didn't know. He couldn't remember - and it frightened him. His last clear memory was of waking in the park. What had happened since was misty, dark, with only occasional shards of light - mainly Catherine's face drifting above him, before him, her fingers touching him. How much was real, how much was dreams, he would never know.

He sat up, waiting for the dizziness to strike him, but his head stayed clear. He could hear Catherine in another room, but he wouldn't disturb her. Rising from the bed, his attention was caught by the colours of the sunset. He moved over to the windows, lost in the beauty of it, lost in his thoughts.

As the sun set over the city, Catherine found Vincent standing at the balcony doors. He looked so sick, still burning with fever, but he was standing, and he was lucid.

"You're feeling better?"

"Yes ... I'm sorry".

"Oh. Vincent, don't be sorry." She began to rub his back, and the touch of her hand brought fleeting memories of a dream. But it was no more than that - a memory he could not grasp.

"It's been my struggle always. Now when I have so much to fight for, I'm losing."

"Maybe the worst is over."

How could she believe that? Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps, like him, she knew it was just beginning.

"If it's not, I ... it's best that I'm Below." He turned to face her. "I should go back."

Catherine looked out at the sunset. She wanted to hold him make him stay - never let him go, but she knew he was right.

"It'll be dark soon."

"Catherine, I don't know what will happen now."

It was a simple statement, spoken with his usual gentle honesty, but Catherine knew that he was sharing his deepest fears, his utter dread of what was happening to him, of what was to come.

"You must promise me one thing - that you will share it with me - whatever happens, whatever comes."

Vincent's arm went around her and he held her close. "Whatever happens, whatever comes - know that I love you."

She had waited so long to hear those words. They should have made her so happy. Instead they made her cry, made her afraid. Afraid of why he had chosen now to speak them.

Vincent left in the darkness. It was the only way to keep Catherine safe from his own darkness. And yet he needed her now, more desperately than ever before. He felt that only her strength, and the strength of her love, could help him endure whatever awaited him, whatever lay ahead, in that endless night before him. But he was alone, and he must stay alone. Not even Catherine must know the torment, the rage of the beast.

He was in the tunnels when the sound of a child's footsteps, running after him, made him pause, his hand resting on the wall, fatigue threatening to overcome him.

"Vincent, where were you? Did you forget our reading group?"

He searched his mind for a memory, but there was none. He was even finding it difficult to remember the child's name. He made himself concentrate and was able to retrieve that memory.

"Forgive me ... Samantha".

"We're supposed to finish the book today."

"Finish ... the book?"

"We're all waiting to see what happens."

He grasped at the name of a book - an important book - '*Great Expectations*'?"

"No - '*Jane Eyre*' - the one we've been reading."

"Oh." It meant nothing to him.

"We're on the last chapter - remember?"

He didn't remember, but Vincent could see how important it was to the girl, so he bent down nearer to her.

"If ... if I am ever ... not there ... Samantha ..." It was becoming increasingly difficult to think - to form words. "You read ... in my place ... you read the last chapter to the class."

"It wouldn't be the same."

"But you read ... so beautifully."

"Just be there, Vincent."

He bowed his head as she left, saddened because he was disappointing this child, knowing that he wouldn't be there, knowing that he would never be there again.

Slowly, he continued through the tunnels until at last he reached his chamber. As he entered he wondered distractedly at its disarray, at the books lying everywhere. He sat down on the bed, returning a book to its home. As he turned again, he heard it, saw it briefly. The roar, the rush of wind, the glint of blood upon fangs already bared to kill - the dark face of his own death - destroying the gentleness, perhaps, this time, forever.

He rose to his feet, all compassion, humanity lost, his thoughts turning immediately to Catherine. Why had he left her? Because Vincent was afraid of the darkness? But was Catherine afraid? He doubted it. Catherine desired. She may have loved the gentleness, but she desired him - always. He had seen the dark places within her. He had seen her lose herself in the killing. She already belonged to him. Now she would see him in all his glory, and she would never forget. He would take her on the bed that she had shared with Vincent. That would destroy his mind forever. He would never return. His need to possess Catherine was turning his body into a throbbing, burning hardness. He must have her now.

He tore from his chamber, crashing against tunnel walls as he hurled himself towards the park entrance. Once there, a figure in front of the gate obstructed his escape. With a powerful sweep of his arm Vincent flung the man to the ground. He could sense the fear in him. Soon they would all be afraid.

He pressed the opening mechanism of the gate, but the gate didn't move. He pressed again. Still it was static, barring his way. Blind fury burst within him, fed by his insatiable hunger for Catherine. Images of her desire were burning in his mind. With a deafening roar he threw himself against the gate, certain that such force would destroy the iron barrier. Nothing would stop him going Above. He gripped the bars and shook until its very foundation was moving, yet it resisted his power. What had they done? Why had they turned this place into a prison? If they tried to stop him going to her he would kill them.

The blinding, throbbing pain of his inflamed arousal, the single-minded force of his desire and the urgent need to kill were fast becoming one within that tortured mind. From somewhere far away there were memories of the violent orgasms that tore through him as he ripped apart the bodies of his victims, as their blood covered his hands.

He was lost, not only to his completion, but to a pleasure so dark, so bloodied, it was incomprehensible. He knew instinctively the utter pleasure, the gratification, he would feel as he tore through her body with his penetration, as he filled her with himself, as his searing flesh was bathed in her blood. He could already feel it. He was swelling as he imagined the touch, the taste of her - the sweetness of her blood upon his lips, his tongue. He was aroused beyond endurance, his body shaking, all control gone. He was completely lost in the beast. His mind, his body tortured by its depravity, by his need for release.

"Vincent." The word echoed faintly behind him as he tore at the gate, as he crushed his weakening body against it.

"Vincent." He turned, snarling a warning - if they didn't let him go, they would die. He growled at the mists, the strange drifting images before him, and raised his arm - ready to kill. He had killed for Catherine so many times before.

"Vincent, come with me - we'll go home."

It was a gentle voice - a voice he knew - and it was partially clearing his vision. Father's face floated before him. He dropped his arm to his side, relinquishing his hold upon the iron bars, which were all but sustaining him, and collapsed into arms always ready to hold him.

"Father ... what if ... if I can't. When will it end?"

"Perhaps soon - soon - and all will be well again."

He could feel Father's love, his gentleness, as he stroked his hair, and he remembered, with heartbreaking certainty, just how close he had come to destroying him. Weakness, unbearable sadness, and fear of the terrible truth overcame him. He needed to be held, to be comforted.

He clung to Father, sobbing like a child. "Bring Catherine."

He tried to believe that she could end this torment. He buried himself in Father's warmth, and Father rocked him, soothed him, as he had done so many years ago. He wanted to stay within the sheltering peace of Father's arms forever, his exhaustion feeding upon the comfort of being held close.

He had no more strength, nothing left to give, but his tears, his sorrow. And his great love for Father. The beast could feel no love - only desire. He couldn't even love Catherine - only hunger for her. For a moment Vincent found it in his heart to pity him - and again he wept.

When the weeping had stopped, Vincent was dimly aware of Father leading him very gently back to his chamber. He sat in Father's chair, lost again in that world of half-lights, when suddenly he was shaken by a voice.

"Vincent, can I get you anything?"

He opened his eyes, turning to face the voice. He saw Olivia, he saw them all. There were so many there - watching over him ... so many to be hurt.

"Do not ... do not come any closer."

Suddenly, a small figure pushed his way forward. "Mouse isn't afraid."

"You should be ... you should ... all ... be afraid."

He was afraid - afraid of what he knew might happen at any moment. He wanted to tell them, to try and make them understand, but he had so few words.

"Listen to me all ... all of you. I ... I do not know how much ... longer I can protect you from me ... so ... I must go from you."

He heard the shocked whispers behind him and once again turned to face them.

"I will ... I will see you again ... when this ... passes."

Olivia asked, "Where will you go?"

He couldn't answer her. He didn't know where he was going. Just that it must be so far away from those he loved, that he could never return.

"Listen to me now ... all of you ... I ... I cannot ... speak ... more. I must say goodbye."

Olivia again. "Vincent, you can't do this".

"I must do this."

With a great effort he rose from the chair and took one final look at the only family he had ever known.

"But I will ... carry with me always ... that you have given me everything ... everything. Give that much ... to each other."

He left them, knowing that very soon he wouldn't even remember their faces ...

As he turned from the chamber, he found the children waiting. The girl stepped forward ... Samantha ... holding out a book to him.

"*Jane Eyre*' - take it. Take it with you, so you can finish it."

He said it as kindly as he could, "You finish it for me." For he no longer had need of books. He knew the child couldn't understand, but perhaps in time she would forgive him.

He left them then - he left the children - he left them all and took a path that would lead him into the darkest aloneness he had ever known ...

Thoughts of their kindness, their concern, agonized him, for he had lied. He had never lied to them before, but he had to then, or they wouldn't have let him go. And what would have happened to them then, when he could no longer protect them?

His eyes, his heart, filled with tears. They were the people he loved, the people who cared for him, and he wanted them with him now - as he was losing his fight, as he was losing everything. But he could ask this of no-one. Not even Catherine. He had lied to her too. He had let her believe that she could share this with him. The last time he saw her - it seemed so long ago now - those last moments of peace - even a kind of happiness. Even then he had known it was a lie - he knew she could never share this. Not even Catherine's love could save him now. He had to be gone before she came. The part of him that was destroying the man so swiftly, so surely, had to be alone at Vincent's death.

He stopped then, in that distant passageway, so near to the place of reckoning, and he cried out his anguish. A cry to eradicate the pain and all that lay within him, all that lay before him. It was the last human sound that he would utter. It came from his body, it came from his soul, and as it died in the air, so the man died too. Whatever remained in that broken body continued its despairing journey until it reached that place - beyond man - beyond everything.

The jaggedness at the mouth of the cave ripped the cloak from his shoulders as he dragged himself into the blackness of his tomb. He stumbled across the rough floor until he reached the farthest wall. He lay against it, letting his body slide down until he was in a crouching position, but he only stayed there, resting on his haunches, a very short time, feeling too vulnerable. There were too many shadows, too many ghosts around him. With a strength he found it hard to find, he pushed himself up to his full height. He curled his lip, snarling a warning, but still they moved towards him. Shades of grey in the darkness.

Cries reverberated from the rocks around him and he moved towards the sounds, the spectres, arm outstretched to kill that, which would invade his domain. But the only enemies he found were the rocks that tore at his clothes, at his body, and the cold grey mist which dampened his burning flesh.

He retreated once more to the comparative safety of the farthest wall, his mind a swirling vortex of rage, pain and imaginings so vile they bore no name. He needed to kill, to taste the blood on his tongue, to feel its warmth on his hands.

He was so cold, the damp air chilling his flesh through his torn clothing. The silent, moving shadows were oppressing him, the tortured cries that filled his mind made him afraid. He had no memory of himself or why he was here. No power to reason. His only focus was the blood of those who would torment him. Blood, and its accompanying release, filled his mind, his being.

Suddenly instinct, for instinct was all he had left, told him that he was not alone. There was a sound, a movement, at the mouth of the cave. Another shadow. But this time there was substance to the shadow. Flesh and blood to be torn - to be tasted. With his last remaining shreds of strength, he raised his arm and lurched towards whatever had dared to confront him.

But, in that moment, above the pounding of his heart and the cries of pain surrounding him, he heard the intruder scream at him, or whatever else was living in the wretchedness of that place - "Vincent."

It was a word he knew from somewhere, sometime long ago. But the voice, and above all, the face that shone through the deepening shadows of his madness, touched something deep within him, something locked within the depths of his being. And he knew, as he had always known, that he would rather die than hurt her.

Finally, the deadly exhaustion, the pain, the fever, overcame him and he sank to the ground, lost now - even to the dreams.

But the darkness had not won.

END